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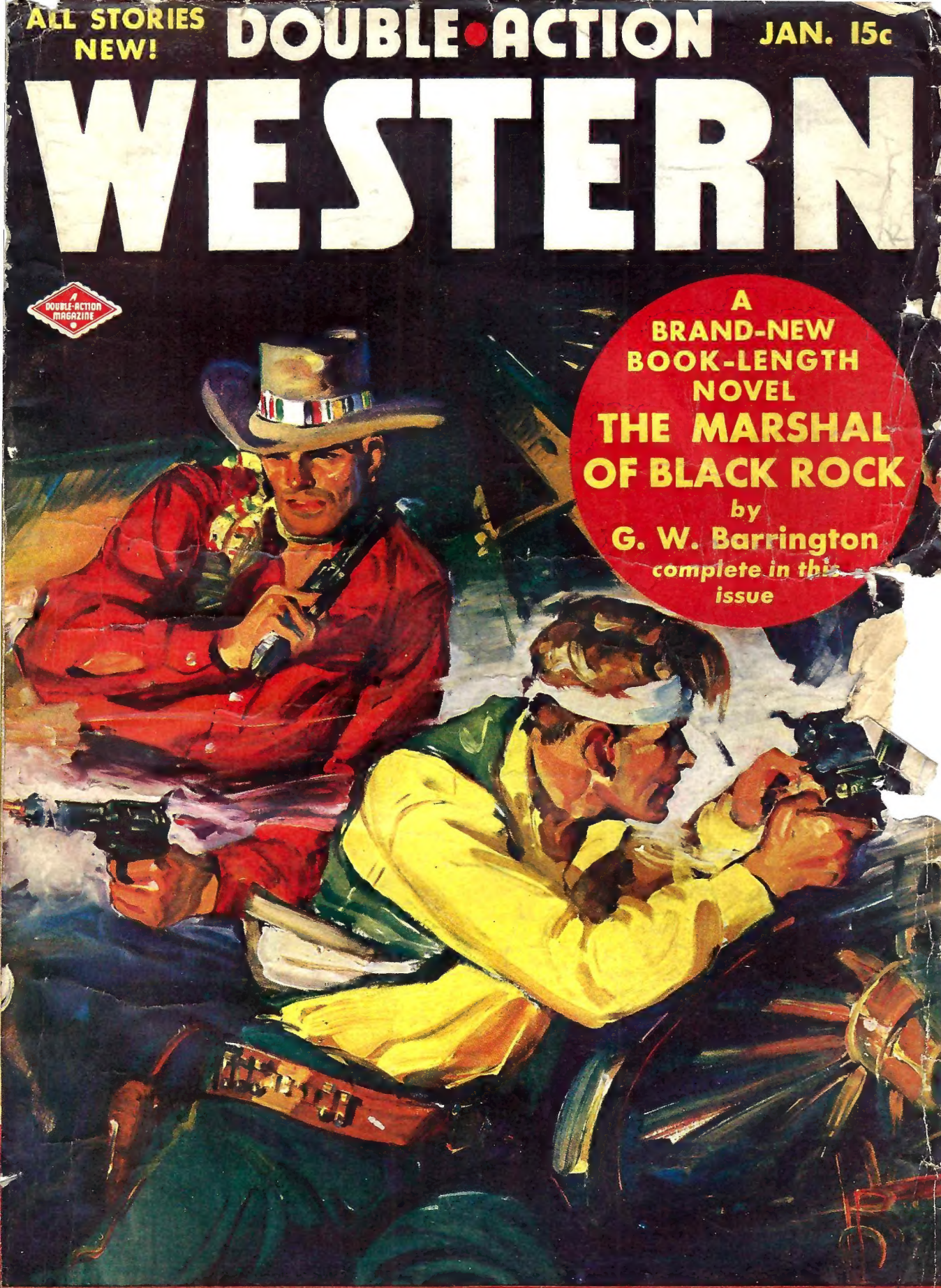

A BRAND-NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

THE MARSHAL OF BLACK ROCK

by G. W. Barrington

complete in this issue

THE GUN-MEDICO FROM HELL'S CORNERS by ED EARL REPP

Rotating Forest Fire Lamp

See the Smoke Rise and the Forest Burn!

Here is a new, unusual Bedroom or Table Lamp with ACTION! Everyone who sees it will be positively fascinated, and it will never fail to be a source of interest and amusement to yo rself and your guests.

The forest fire on this lamp shade, in beautiful lithographed, brilliant colors, **really seems to burn.** The flames leap into the air and the dark smoke rolls across the sky. An unusual lamp that has action. It represents one of the most realistic scenes you have ever seen and it never fails to interest everybody. Aside from the forest fire in the background there is the beautiful lake and quiet in the foreground. The automatic revolving cylinder gives the scene right after you plug it into the socket. It requires no electricity to keep it going as the ordinary heat of the bulb makes it turn. A novel and beautiful mystery lamp. Colors are so realistic that it looks like an oil painting. Artistic metal top and base.

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INSIDE . . . . She is Handsomely Revealed!

From the outside of the glass, these beautiful little lasses are shown in modest poses . . . but turn the glass around, and lo! their costume drops away leaving them in nature's own! Fill the glass with a liquid and she becomes "lively," revealing every curve. Try one on the windshield of your car.

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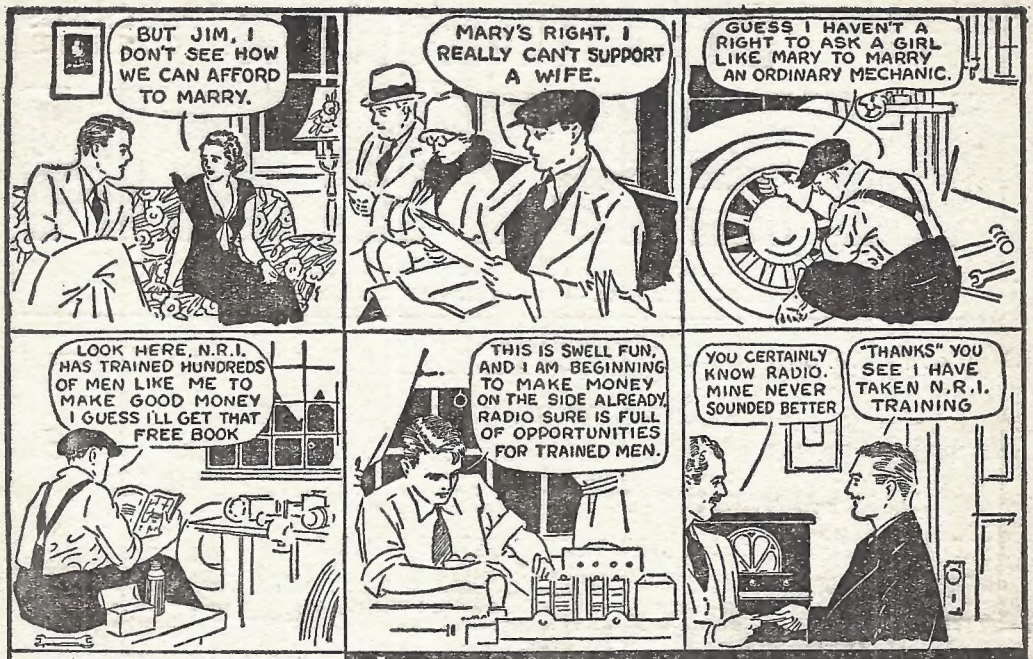
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.
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WESTERN

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Vol. VI, No. 6 *Jan., 1939, Issue*

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A handful of ragged back-to-the-wall townsmen elected Cliff Rudd, head money fugitive, as marshal of their overrun outlaw town—to guard them and their families against the guns of a renegade horde's colt-crazy legions!

A BIG NEW ACTION NOVEL

THE GUN-MEDICO FROM HELL'S CORNERS .... *Ed Earl Repp* 74

Neither hot lead nor midnight raiders could drive doctor Tip Wycoff from the range he loved, nor could the shadows of a hangnoose hell cause him to betray the men who had given him their trust!

A SMASHING NEW NOVELET

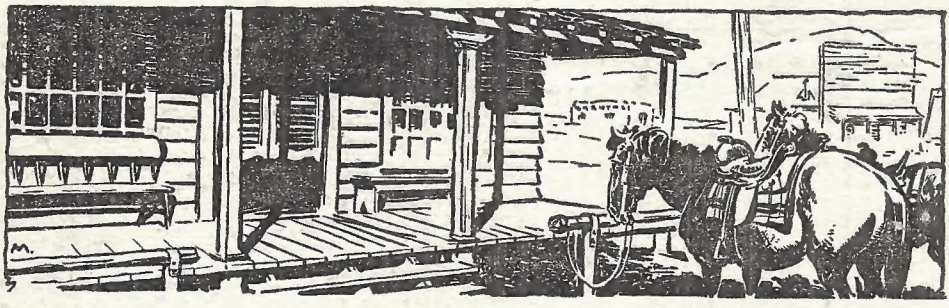
A PUNCHER CHOOSES BOOT-HILL ..... *Zachary Strong* 90

Could that hell-spawned greaser murderer get this devil's crew to accomplish one more massacre—or would the terrible justice of Wally Bates' roaring Colts rid the rangeland forever of the Lobo breed?

A DRAMATIC NEW SHORT STORY

LAWMAN'S HERITAGE ..... *Bruce Bryan* 106

Not until the old-timer could face through a gun-smoke fog the man who had caused him to murder his own beloved son, could he ever again buckle on those twin colts, with which he had written the law-bringing history of the frontier!



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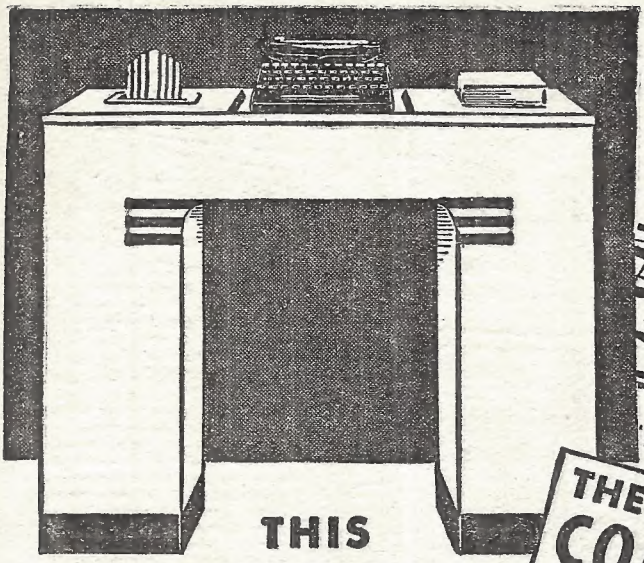

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* H. C. S., Calif.

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The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

* S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Plays on Radio

I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

* W. H. S., Alabama.

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I want to say that my friends are greatly surprised at the different pieces I can already play. I am very happy to have chosen your method of learning.

* B. F., Bronx, N. Y.

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Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.

* A. O., Minn.

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Hawaiian Guitar		

Have You This Instrument?

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Address.....

City.....State.....

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

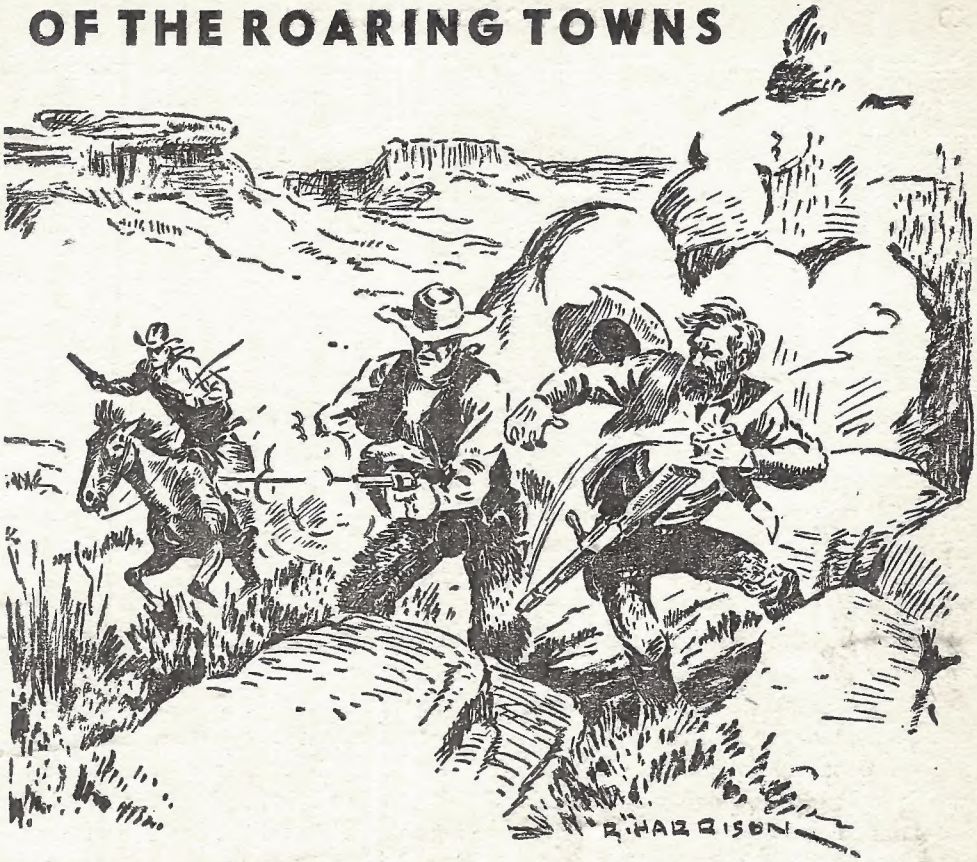
Cliff jumped his bronc over the steer's carcass—his .45 clearing leather and spitting death in a split second. The bearded renegade dropped his rifle and fell to the ground, blood gushing between his clenched fingers

CHAPTER I

TANGLED TRAILS

CLIFF RUDD blinked his sunslitted eyes and dropped his head a bit to allow the flat brim of his pearl hat to shade his upper face. On ahead, where the little heat imps were doing their all-day sundance about the base of a crumbling brown boulder a pin-point of intense white light flashed brilliantly at intervals. Cliff watched it closely as he reined his big bay roper a little to the left among the waving blue-green sagebrush in order to have the boulder on his right when he passed it.

But one disc of glare had worried his face, so it wasn't from field glasses. The alternative was a telescope sight, and when



THE MARSHAL OF BLACK ROCK

by G. W. BARRINGTON

When Cliff Rudd, blood money fugitive from the terrible law-bringing Colts of Hawkface Gibbons, blindly accepted the badge of town marshal of Black Rock, he had to stand alone between those terrorized gun-frightened townsmen and the pistols of a hired killer legion. For Cliff knew that the life of one man counted as nothing when bleak destruction threatened the desperate range families he was proud to call his friends!

a telescope sight reflects full into a man's face, the muzzle of a rifle is lined fairly on that man.

In a way, Cliff was not surprised. Because he had heard that Tumbleweed was the toughest cowtown in the region where

the western Nebraska sandhills met the badlands, he was headed for Tumbleweed; and because he also had been told that the trail along the edge of the badlands was particularly dangerous, Cliff was riding it.

Now, there was nothing to do but to keep going and trust to luck. He was within riflerange, and in the open, while the man behind that gun-sight had good cover.

Red slowed, tilting his pointed ears suspiciously toward the boulders when the little shaft of light bothered his vision. He minced on, obediently when Cliff prompted him in a low tone. Still a hundred yards from the crumbling rock, Cliff reined left and threw himself out of saddle when the hidden rifle barked angrily and a slug hummed beneath Red's belly, changing its tone from a sharp hiss to an angry buzz when it shed its steel jacket on a piece of rubble and ricocheted on through the sage and sumac that lay behind.

Drawing a six in midair, Cliff landed on his hip and elbow and sent three slugs humming toward where the rifle had shown. Then he ordered the snorting Red to "steady an' stay put," and doubled back through the sage, then to the right till he struck a chain of smaller rocks that led up to the boulder. Snaking through the low growth, six in hand, he had almost reached the suspected spot when, first the rifle, then a man's head and shoulders, showed above a low rampart at the base of the big block. Cliff took one look at the fellow and the grim set of his jaw relaxed.

THE man was young, slender, with a round, cherubic face that was pitifully sunburnt. Everything about his clothing and equipment was new, as was the gear on the fat polka-dotted saddlehorse and the loaded packmule Cliff now could see back of the rock. The stranger wore thick lensed glasses, and a green eye shade contrasted oddly with his cowboy git-up.

Cliff grinned a little sheepishly at his own previous uneasiness, and rose. "Hello, Greenie," he called, stepping close to the fellow and casually grabbing the barrel of the rifle when the other jerked it around.

"Who are you?" the camper asked, tremulously, releasing his hold on the gun and clawing a heavy six from his holster—only to have it wrenched away.

"I'm the Booger Man," Cliff answered, fiercely, "the one yur Maw tells yuh about when yuh don't go t' sleep prompt." He twisted the little man around despite his frantic struggles, shoved him backward to a rock slab and seated him on it. "Set there in th' shade fur a while an' let yur brains kinda cool," he advised. "Then tell me what th' humped-up hell made yuh try t' gun me."

"Wasn't trying to kill you—just wanted to scare you away. The man over at Tumbleweed told me that there were lots of bad men out here, and I didn't want you to come any nearer." He smiled thinly as he added, "I repeat that I didn't try to hit you, but I don't suppose it would have been any different if I had been trying. I just don't seem to be able to make a gun do right."

Cliff soberly took a stub pencil and bit of paper from his saddle-pocket and asked, "What's yur name, Greenie?"

The thin chest puffed out. "I'll have you to know that I'm Harry C. Brainard Jr., son of Honorable Harry C. Brainard, Omaha banker and political leader."

"Thanks, I'm th' Right Honorable Clifton C. Rudd, an' my family pedygree is so damn long I step on it every time I try to run fast." He put up the pencil and paper after scribbling. "Thanks again. I just wanted to jot down th' name of th' world's cham-peen damn fool, out on his own where he don't belong. What yuh think yuh're doin' out here?"

"I'm an entomologist from the State Agricultural College. I study insects."

"So do I, an' I'm studyin' yuh plumb intensive.

" 'Mongst other things, I see yuh was

gittin' ready to camp—out here where they ain't nuff water t' wet a ant's shirt-tail."

Brainard's sun-blistered face turned a deeper shade of scarlet. "I'm lost," he confessed. "I intended to camp on Badger Creek, and I can't find it. I wanted to go back to Tumbleweed and start over, but I can't find my way there."

Cliff jerked his head toward the packmule. "Buy that hardtail at Tumbleweed?"

"Yes."

"Turn 'er loose an' foller 'er. It's afternoon now, so she'll hustle back home. Here's your guns. I'm advisin' that yuh swap 'em fur a checker board or somethin'. They just ain't yur size."

Brainard looked crestfallen. "I'll never carry a rifle again. I can't see at long range, anyway. As to the revolver, it's too long and heavy for me."

Cliff grinned understandingly. "Been tryin' it, eh?"

"Yes. Shot it three times this morning. The noise almost deafened me and it kicked awful." He looked wistfully at Cliff's holster. "What size is that one of yours?"

"Thirty-eight."

Still more wistfully, "Wouldn't trade, would you? Mine's a forty-five."

"Don't wanta cheat yuh. Ol' Betts here has been a plumb good one, but her day's 'bout done. Grooves is wored so she don't shoot true, very far."

"That will be quite all right. I can't see very far, either."

"Awright, if yuh insist." Cliff passed his gun over and slipped the forty-five into his holster after trying the balance of it. After thinking for a while, he got a short barreled, nickle-plated '32' from a saddle-pocket and tossed it to Brainard. "Throwin' that in to make the trade more even." He looked at Brainard again and took pity on him. "Yuh figgerin' on campin' out by yur lonesome while yuh're roundin' up these here insects an' brandin' 'em?"

"Yes."

"Don't do it. Some great big insect'll up an' elope with yuh. Go on back to Tumbleweed an' wait till I've sized this neighborhood up a little. When I've found a good campsite I'll come git yuh an' we'll entymologe t'gether fur a while."

Brainard brightened wonderfully. "Fine! Of course, I wasn't worried any, but—"

"I think yur a damn liar. Yuh was worried a-plenty, an' no wonder. Go on back to town an' remember one thing: Th' right thing for a tenderfoot t' do when he hits th' range is t' say, 'Here I am, fellers. I'm plumb green, but willin' t' learn.' If th' boys puts yuh on a bucker after yuh've said that, it'll be a hawse that won't kill yuh."

Twenty minutes later, Cliff stood on the crest of the knoll watching the grey horse jog after the packmule which was working its way briskly northward through the dunes. "Yuh're good stock run to seed, little feller," Cliff muttered as he watched his new friend bob up and down in saddle as the grey jolted on.

"Good stock run to seed, but I'm thinkin' it's damn good seed, at that."

Cliff mounted, rode northwestward for a half hour, camped beside a limpid little pond at the base of a cedar-crested knoll.

THE brassy sun swung westward till the knoll cut the light on the flat in half, only the tips of the dunes showing in blazing orange. Cliff fed Red a short ration of oats from a small sack tied to the cantle, then spread his tarp and blanket for the night.

The day had been hot; the placid pond looked alluring. Cliff went to the shelving shore, hung his belt on a willow stub, stripped off his clothes, took a running start and dove high and far into water that was so deep it showed green-amber in the fading light. Fifteen yards from shore, he trod water and looked inquiringly at the horse.

Red had bugled, then stood statuesque, immobile, his expanded nostrils sifting the

light breeze. As Cliff watched, the horse's shoulder muscles corded and he stamped, irritably.

"What is it, boy?" Cliff asked. "'Nother hawse, or—

"Oh, I see. Hum-m! This don't look so good."

Two heavily-armed men had risen from among the willows on the far bank. Without taking another look, Cliff turned, dove, stayed under till his nose was rubbing gravel on the shore, and he was among the willows. He scrambled to his feet, started to lunge up the bank, then stopped, his jaw sagged in surprise.

His holstered belt had disappeared from the willow stump. Near by it, a little red-headed man in jeans pants and vest was standing, holding a rifle carelessly under his arm, Cliff's belt looped about his shoulder. "Stay where yuh are, feller," he ordered, brusquely, then raised his voice to call across the pond:

"Ramble aroun' here, boys! I got th' waddy penned proper!"

THE little man with the rifle hadn't made a quick motion or shifted the gun. Yet Cliff had no thought of moving—especially after the man had turned about a little, showing a star marked SHERIFF glittering on his vest. While waiting for the others, he squatted comfortably on his heels and laid the rifle across his lap while he looted the pocket of his stained vest for paper and tobacco with which he proceeded to lace up a thin husk cigaret.

Cliff looked his captor over closely. He was thin, wiry, leathery skinned, with a face like a knife. The nose was beaked almost to a cutting edge, and the eyes were small, black, close-set, but keen as an eagle's.

"Well," he said, after lighting the cigaret from a match scratched on his thumbnail. "Bein's yuh're lookin' me over kinda curiouslike, mebbe I better tell yuh that I'm Hawkface Gibbons. That tell yuh anything?"

"I should say it does," Cliff assured him, readily. "Everybody between th' Platte an' th' Niobrara knows Hawkface Gibbons."

"Awright," the sheriff said. "If yuh know about me, then yuh know I always git my man, and I always take him in—or his hide."

"Yeh, I know—but what I can't figger is, what caused yuh to spot me as yur man."

"We'll argue 'bout that after th' boys gits here," Hawkface said, dryly. "I reckon yuh've heared that I always do one thing at a time, an' never take no chances. Right now I'm smokin' an' ridin' herd on you."

When the two men from the other side of the lake tramped up, Cliff saw that both wore stars, as deputies. One of them was big, muscular, with a loose, good-natured mouth and placid oxlike eyes. The other was slimmer, withier, darker, and plainly showed that his veins carried a splash of Indian blood.

"Well, I ain't no blushin' violet," Cliff said, "but th' spectators is assemblin'. I'll thank yuh kindly to let me put my pants on."

The sheriff picked up Cliff's trousers, emptying their pockets of money, a trinket or two and a jack-knife. He slipped the jack-knife into his own pocket, then replaced the other articles and tossed the garment to Cliff's feet. "When did yuh see Lem Tucker last?" he asked, bluntly.

"Never heared of any geezer by that name," Cliff answered, teetering on one foot while he inserted the other into a trouser leg. "What yuh askin' me about him for?"

" 'Cause he was shot plumb dead this afternoon. 'Bout a quarter up north there—plugged in th' back by some damn sneakin' side-winder. An' here we find a dew-drinkin' geezer camped at th' edge of th' badlands, an' they's nobody else aroun'."

The matter commenced to look less and less like a joke. Cliff had heard all about

Hawkface Gibbons, and knew that the little sheriff dealt out justice fairly, but swiftly—never bothering to complain to a court when he decided a man ought to be hanged.

"Well, have yuh got me convicted?" Cliff asked, picking up the shirt the biggest deputy had tossed to him.

"Mebbe not," Hawkface granted. "I wanta take a look at yur gun, first."

"Look yur head off," Cliff told him, unconcernedly. A chill came over him a moment later when Hawkface broke the six and tossed the shells out in his gnarled hand. Even from where he stood, Cliff could see that one of the shells was an *empty*. He stopped with his arms only half in the shirt and his head poked over it as he watched soberly while Hawkface returned the shells to the cylinder and rose.

"Go fetch my rope, Ben," the sheriff said shortly to the biggest deputy, then turned to squint appraisingly at a horizontal branch on the big cottonwood by the fire. "May as well fetch our hawses, too, while yuh're over that way."

"Hey," Cliff objected. "Bein' a interested party, I wanta make a few remarks before this court does much more bizness!" Speaking rapidly, he told them about the gun trade.

"Where's this Brainard, now?" Hawkface asked, non-committally, when the puncher had finished.

"Siftin' sand for Tumbleweed," Cliff told him, then explained how and why Brainard had left.

"Pick up his sign an' hustle along an' pinch him, Joe," the sheriff ordered. "Don't ask him no questions till I git there.

"Go ketch this ranny's hawse, Ben. I reckon he's lyin', but we'll take him in an' find out. One thing's a cinch: Lem was kilt by a forty-five. One of these two geezers done it; from what I've seen of that runty little Brainard, I ain't got no idee it's him."

THE two deputies tramped off around the west side of the lake. Hawkface squatted on his heels again, the rifle across his knees, his sharp face thoughtful.

Cliff shrugged into his shirt, his mind clicking busily. He never had been in jail and felt the humiliation of his arrest keenly. In addition, he knew that his story was a shaky one, and that his position was desperate. As well as he knew anything, he knew that Brainard hadn't murdered anyone. That left him in a bad spot.

He regretted the gun trade bitterly, but there was no profit in that.

Desperate, Cliff decided to take a chance. Fastening the shirt, he unbuttoned his trousers to tuck the tails in, meanwhile lessening the distance between him and the sheriff by almost imperceptible foot movements.

Hawkface appeared to be still engrossed with his thoughts. Cliff had stolen more than a yard on him when he spoke unexpectedly, his thin voice casual:

"Suit yurself, feller; but I'm advisin' yuh not to try it. I'm admittin' that yuh ain't got much of a chance no way; but yuh won't have none a-tall if yuh try to jump me. Better squat down an' wrestle them boots on—that'll keep yuh outa mischief."

Cliff bit his lip and followed the officer's suggestion. "I'm puttin' out one little piece of information for yuh, though," he said, stubbornly. "I'll handle my hawse, myself. If that don't go, I'll jump yuh an' make yuh shoot hell outa me."

Hawkface only looked at him, then started to build a fresh smoke. Joe jogged by, picked up Brainard's sign and went loping briskly eastward on it. Ben appeared a little later, leading a clean-limbed black gelding and a paint mare. The sheriff tossed the butt of his cigaret away and rose: "Git yur hawse an' dress him, feller," he ordered, "but if yuh're figgerin' on any monkey-doodle bizness, yuh better leave it out."

The two officers stood one each side of Cliff while he geared the bay and gathered up his traps, fastened them to the saddle, and mounted. The sheriff lashed Cliff's

ankles together under Red's belly, while Ben took the lead rope and fastened it to the horn of his own saddle. "Yuh two rannies shore don't believe in takin' a chance," Cliff said, a little scornfully.

"Yuh're damn tootin' we don't," Hawkface said, swinging up on the black. "That's why I've sheriffed aroun' Tumbleweed for ten year, an' am still alive, though my county lays right next to th' meanest damn hell-hole in th' United States. I never take a chance, an' I never guess at nothin'.

"Hit th' trail, Ben. It's gittin' dark."

Briskly, silently, they jogged northward along the rim of the Badlands till they hit a dim trail and turned eastward along it, as the dusk closed down. Four or five miles further on, they swung into a wide valley on the far side of which twinkling lights showed on the hillside like so many flashing gems on a purple velvet cushion.

Fifteen minutes later, the tired horses jogged up a narrow canyon of neat, false-fronted buildings, turned in on a vacant lot and angled toward the alley where a long, low, stone building showed in the light of the rising moon.

"Well, here we are," the sheriff said, sliding down. "Stick a gun 'ginst his backbone, Ben, while I unhobble his feet. We'll soon have th' geezer put away safe."

"Permanent?" Cliff asked.

"No, temporary, I reckon," Hawkface answered, grimly, as he commenced untying the thongs. "Lem Tucker was a big cattleman an' a hell of a good feller. When a jasper like him gits beefed, somethin' hasta be done about it."

Again, Cliff was ready to take a chance, the moment his feet were freed. But there was no chance. Ben's gun bored against his spine; the sheriff stuck another against his ribs before ordering him down. Grating his even teeth in exasperation, Cliff marched toward that abomination of a freedom-loving plainsman—a jail.

Using one hand, the sheriff unlocked a door, scratched a match on his thumbnail and lighted a bracket lamp on the wall of what evidently was his office. There was a desk, a bunk, a few chairs, a clutter of saddle gear and a wall rack loaded with rifles. Taking a big key from a nail on the wall, Hawkface unlocked and opened a steel-barred door in the far wall, disclosing a second room into which Cliff was piloted. Not once during the entire proceedings did the sheriff's six leave Cliff's ribs, or Ben's ease its pressure against his spine.

Cliff looked quickly around the stuffy little room. There were two shelf-like bunks with clean mattresses and blankets. A heavy plank run crosswise of the room at the far end and served as a bench. A water bucket with a big tin dipper stood on one end of the bench; there was a rusty wash basin and a heavy towel. Not another article of any kind was in the place.

One quick glance convinced the puncher that there was no possibility of escape by his own efforts. The walls and floor were of heavy stone blocks mortared solidly. The ceiling was of thick oaken beams closely fitted. Like the master, the litle jail left nothing to chance.

Having relocked the door, and shook it to make sure it was secure, Hawkface hung the key and Cliff's belt and gun on the wall by the outer door, and he and Ben tramped out, the sheriff saying over his shoulder, "We'll fetch yuh some supper after a bit, if yuh think yuh'll feel like eatin'."

"Never was hungrier in my life," Cliff told him with a cheerful unconcern that was far from genuine.

A key grated in the outer lock. The footsteps of the two men ground on the gravelly soil of the lot for a little time, then were drowned by the heavier tread of the horses as they were led past the building from front to rear. Down the alley a little way, and across it, corral bars rattled, then a pump squealed. Again the outer door was opened and Ben appeared carrying Cliff's saddle and bridle which he hung on a peg. "Lucky I interduced my hawse to yuh geez-

ers, or he'd a fit hell outa yuh," Cliff said.

"Uh-huh," Ben grunted. "Lucky fur th' hawse."

After the deputy had stumped out, Cliff sat down on the bench and started to roll a cigaret. "I orter told 'em to fetch me some tobacco," he mused, noticing that the bag was nearly flat. "I dunno, either," he said, on second thought. "If that little Salamander of a Brainard don't talk just right, this sack is holdin' more tobacco than I'll ever need."

CHAPTER II

THAT NIGHT

TUMBLEWEED settled gradually into her busy evening stride. Through the windows of the sheriff's room, Cliff could see the lighted fronts of the buildings on the far side of the street. Within his range of vision was a wide-fronted general store, a long narrow saloon, a narrower poolhall and part of a feedlot. Across to the isolated jail came the click of pool balls, an occasional snatch of trail song; but in the main the men in the crowded saloon and poolhall were knotted in small groups to talk animatedly—about the Tucker murder, Cliff assumed. Twice he saw the little sheriff in the saloon, both times surrounded by a mass of jostling men who appeared to be questioning him—even arguing with him at times, Cliff thought.

Ranchers and punchers were dribbling in off the plains by ones and two and small groups. When a delegation of at least twenty punchers galloped in and halted before the saloon, entering in a body, and leaving it in the same way after taking a hasty drink, Cliff watched them suspiciously as they jingled down the walk in a compact mass and stationed themselves before the feedlot, where they milled restlessly about as cattle do when a storm is approaching. A tall sandy-headed man with a long, spiral moustache who appeared to be their leader, detached himself from the group and had some kind of conference with Hawkface Gibbons, who had followed them from the saloon. The two gesticulated emphatically, and Cliff gathered that the tall man was objecting to some course the sheriff insisted upon pursuing.

"Anyway, I'm bettin' on th' sheriff," Cliff said to himself. "That hell-poppin' little wampus wouldn't knuckle under to th' other gazabo if he had a thousand ramnihans with him, 'stead of a coupla dozen. No matter who wins th' debate, though, looks like I'm—"

The key grated in the outer door. Cliff's spirits rose when he saw Ben and Joe enter, herding Brainard, who looked tired, nervous and worried.

After ordering Cliff to sit on the bench at the far end of the room, Ben unlocked the steel door and motioned Brainard inside. "Set on one of them bunks an' keep yur trap shut," he ordered, gruffly, as Joe left, locking the outer door after him. "Yuh two gillygaloo birds ain't to do no talkin' till Hawkface gits here." Ben got a chair and sat in it, eyeing the prisoners unwinkingly.

Burning with a desire to know what Brainard would say, Cliff framed a question on his lips, but left it unasked. No use to start a fracas; Hawkface must be allowed to work the thing out as he saw fit. He fell to watching Brainard, whose actions appeared to Cliff to be somewhat peculiar.

Stretching out on the bunk, the little scientist rolled over on his stomach and relaxed as one completely exhausted. But he seemed to be fidgety, rolling to one hip, then the other, and smoothing the wrinkled blankets with his palms.

Then Cliff saw. His heart pounding against his ribs, he had to struggle hard to maintain his composure when his eye caught the dull glitter of metal in the half-light as Brainard patted the blanket, after stretching out on his stomach again. In a flash it came to Cliff that Joe had taken Brainard's gun and belt, but had overlooked the short-barreled .32 tucked inside his shirt.

"Whatchu doin' there?" Ben came out of his chair to ask, suspiciously.

"Nothing," Brainard snapped. "You don't expect a fellow to stay perfectly still do you, when a bunch of crazy officers have him stuck in jail?

"Just to satisfy you, though, I'll lie on this other bunk where the light is on me, all the time."

Cliff could have hugged his innocent-eyed cellmate. By moving to the other bunk Brainard had lessened the probability of the pistol being discovered.

IN A FEW minutes, Cliff was almost suffocated with suspense when Hawkface came in and called Brainard to the cell door. "Gotta few questions for yuh," he said, brushing aside the objections and complaints Brainard was showering at him. He shot the questions tersely:

"Yuh make a gun trade with that other geezer?"

"Yes, why?"

"What time?"

"Between three and four o'clock. Why?"

"Had yuh shot th' gun today?"

"Yes—three times, I think. Why?"

"Reload 'er after each shot?"

"Yes. Why?"

"That's all. Open th' door an' let 'im out, Ben."

"Wait a minnit," Cliff objected, springing up. "Yuh don't know it, Brainard, but yuh're sentencin' me to death when yuh claim yuh turned that six over to me full loaded up. Think hard, now, man! Didn't yuh leave a empty in th' gun th' last time yuh shot it?"

"No-o—that is, I don't think I—er—wait a second! I put twenty shells into my belt this morning. When I took six out later and put 'em in the gun, that would leave fourteen. Then, if I shot three times, reloading each time, that would leave—"

"'Leven," the sheriff cut in.

"But they's twelve there," Ben supplied. "I've counted 'em, awready. Must be he didn't reload after th' last shot.

"It means also that this other jasper never shot that gun a-tall."

"Yeh, an' that 'ud mean that this little sissy kilt Tucker," the sheriff deduced dryly, then shook his head. "I'm admittin' that I'm some puzzled, but I can't believe nothin' like that. Turn th' little feller loose, Ben, an' hold t'other waddy, plumb tight. I gotta go back acrost th' street for a spell. Th' boys over there seems to be gittin' kinda impatientlike, from th' way things sounds."

"Arguing about me?" Cliff asked.

"Yeh," the sheriff answered as he started for the door. "They wanta hang yuh right now, an' I wanta wait till sunup an' kinda think it over. I don't liketa show ondue haste in these here legal matters."

"But Brainard admits that he musta fired every shot that come out of that gun, as I hain't got no ammunition of that size," Cliff submitted.

Hawkface shook his head again. "He didn't say that the first time I asked him. Reckon he must have changed his story to help yuh out. Somehow, I can't believe that a wise boy like yuh are got hisself a new gun an' didn't try it, even once."

The little sheriff's lean jaw thrust out unyieldingly. "Course, I think yuh shot that gun. I think yuh tried it on Lem Tucker, an' it worked first rate."

"But why should I kill Tucker?"

"Money, of course. They was a payroll took off him."

"I didn't have it."

"Plenty places for yuh to cache it. Keep cases on him, Ben, while I go palaver with them wild-eyed Circle-Eight fellers. First thing we know they'll be over here hell-bent on a hangin'."

"Going to knuckle under to 'em?" Cliff asked, trying not to let his anxiety show in his voice.

"Dunno." Hawkface answered. "If yuh was in my place yuh could see th' thing like I do. I run this county my own way, most

usual. Still an' all, Tucker's dead. an' them Circle-Eight fellers has gotta big kick comin'. I'll think it over. I think they're right, but I don't want 'em to git th' idee that they can cuff me down. I'll think it over."

"An' if yuh was in my place yuh could see th' thing like I do," Cliff came back, dryly. "I hope yuh do a little of yur thinkin' from that standpoint."

THE SHERIFF was barely in the open before Cliff was on his feet. Ben watched him with idle interest when he poured water into the basin as though preparing to wash. He dipped up a little water in the tin cup, tasted of it, then spat it out disgustedly. "Hotter than th' hinges of hell! Dawgone it, feller, if yuh ain't never gonna feed me, seems like yuh might at least give a feller a decent drink!"

The puncher's heart beat like a muffled gong while Ben considered the request, a worried look on his flabby face. "Plumb 'gainst orders fur me to go away an' leave yuh, even for a secont. Still, I won't be outa sight for no time.

"No funny bizness, though. Set that bucket down by th' door, then go back an' set on th' bench. If yuh make a move while I got this door open, I'll chill yuh."

"Wish yuh would take th' cup along an' rinse it good," Cliff requested. "It ain't been cleaned for so dad-gummed long it tastes like a choleried owl has been roostin' in it."

"Yuh're sure a finnicky cuss," Ben grumbled. But he took the pail and cup and departed, locking the inner door, but leaving the outer one ajar.

With the first squeal of the pump over by the corral Cliff came off the bench, leaped to the bunk, jerked the blanket down and grabbed the short nickel-plated gun. Bounding back to the bench, he laid the gun down and sloshed water over his face and hair, then grabbed the big towel and stood drying his ruddy face when Ben reappeared, locking the outer door and pocketing the key. Cliff's heart was in his throat as he watched the big deputy make his preparations to put the water inside.

Not once had that cell door been opened except when a gun was in an officer's hand. Cliff's hope was that Ben would make an exception, this time. It was for that reason that he had sent the cup along—so that the officer would have something in each hand if he delivered both articles at one trip.

A sort of cheer from the Circle-Eight bunch across by the feedlot chilled Cliff's blood, but it also appeared to worry Ben a little. Cliff guessed that the good-natured deputy didn't wish it known that he had broken the rules by favoring his prisoner, for he evidently was in a great rush to get the water inside before anyone came in.

At an awkward trot, Ben came to the cell door and set the bucket down while he unlocked it. A fraction of a second would tell the tale, now.

Would he draw his gun, and set, first the cup, then the bucket inside? Or, would he bring them in both at once, giving Cliff the chance for which he was waiting?

The puncher could have yelled for joy, when, after assuring himself that his prisoner was at the far end of the room, Ben opened the door with his foot and came through it, bucket in one hand, cup in the other.

With one wary eye on the puncher, he could only stop and stare stupidly when Cliff dropped the towel and leveled the gun it had been hiding. "Yuh're a good feller, Ben, an' I like yuh," he said evenly, as he rose and crossed the room in three long strides. "For that reason, I'd be sorry to have yuh make any kinda break, right now."

"Damn!" Ben said dolefully, still holding his bucket and cup. "I'm shore in one hell of a fix, now. If yuh don't kill me, Hawkface will. He ain't never lost no prizner since he's been in office, an' he's gonna be plumb rabid if I let yuh git away with this."

"An' I'm gonna be plumb rabid if yuh don't," Cliff told him, as he lifted the deputy's gun from its holster and motioned with

it. "Set them things down an' git back out there an' set down in that tall chair!

"Steady now! Remember I just *gotta* plug yuh if yuh try anything or make a cheep as loud as a chippy bird!"

Backing Ben into the chair, Cliff got a rope from the wall and lashed his arms and legs fast, then gagged him with the towel and his own neckcloth. Apprehension led speed to his fingers when the bunch across the street let out another cheer and the sidewalk resounded to the pound of their heels. Glancing through the windows he saw them enter the saloon and line the bar, at the head of which was the little sheriff. Once they got inside the brilliantly lighted saloon he could see that all of them wore satisfied looks, and several of them slapped Hawkface's thin shoulders in a friendly way.

Cliff wasn't entirely satisfied with the gag, but it would have to do. The Circle-Eight bunch had come to an agreement with the sheriff. They would take a drink —two, perhaps—to ratify the agreement. Then Cliff had better be somewhere else.

The puncher grabbed his belt off the wall, buckled it on, took his rig off its peg and turned to the door. He swore under his breath when on turning the knob he found the door locked, and remembered that the key was in the deputy's pocket. He was just turning to get it, when he heard footsteps approaching rapidly outside.

It was time for quick thinking. Ben had been placed with his back to the front windows, and with only his head showing above the back of the big chair. Cliff's task was to get himself out of sight. He eased the saddle to the floor as noiselessly as possible, then tucked his lithe body against the wall by the door and waited, scarcely breathing, while a key turned in the lock and it swung inward, just as Ben commenced straining at his bonds and turning his big head from side to side in an effort to give the alarm.

The puncher braced his muscles and drew in a full breath when a foot appeared on the threshold, and with it Joe's heavy flat voice. "Th' boss an' th' bunch'll be here in a minnit, Ben. They're gonna—"

JOE'S swarthy face appeared, registering surprise and excitement when he glanced at the empty cell. After giving Ben a quick look, he opened his mouth to emit a yell that was cut to a shuddering groan when the butt of the .45 thundered against the base of his skull, just back of his ear.

Catching the falling man, Cliff eased him to the floor, then grabbed up his saddle and leaped through the open door, almost colliding with the sheriff, who had come running from across the street, meanwhile.

They were breast-to-breast before either had become aware of the other. With no time to swing the six, Cliff struck with it as one does with a set of brass knuckles, luckily hitting the little sheriff squarely upon the point of his jaw with the trigger guard. The sheriff collapsed without a sound, but as he did so, Ben's voice broke out inside, first partially muffled, then in a roaring bellow: "Hey! He's gittin' away! Th' prizner's gittin' a-wa-a-y!"

Cliff leaped outside, felt his way around the corner of the building, and along it to the alley. Across the narrow lane, the rails of the high corral loomed dimly in the gloom. He heaved the saddle to the top rail, vaulted over and whistled as softly as his catchy breath would allow.

Immediately Red's answering nicker sounded and the big horse came mincing to him. Heaving the saddle on, he tightened the front cinch, merely working the latigo through the ring on the rear one and knotting it loosely. With the horse bridled, he groped for the gate, first with the mistaken idea that it opened on the alley.

Men were pouring from the saloon, store and poolhall now, calling to each other as they pounded across. One cowboy who had just ridden into town swerved his bronc across the sidewalk at the front of the jail lot and came whooping to the alley, just as

Cliff located the gate, which he found opened on the next lot, instead of the alley. He had two bars down when the cowboy on the horse heard the rattle of them and shot his bronc right at the corral, shooting as he came. Cliff shot from the hip, and the plunging horse collapsed, throwing its rider heavily. Before he could disentangle himself from the fallen mount, Cliff got another bar down and jumped Red over the remaining three, swinging into saddle as the big horse plunged into the darkness of the vacant lot.

Glancing backward, the puncher saw the sheriff come reeling around the corner of the jail, again on his feet, but quite evidently dazed, as he was fumbling at his holster, but unable to get his gun out.

For seconds, Cliff held his breath and let the good horse have his head. There might be machinery, trash, vehicles there, and he could only trust Red to find a way through. Guns were popping by the jail now, and he could hear the sheriff's thin voice, weak but commanding: "Quit that wild shootin' at th' corral! Yuh'll kill my stock! He's gone from there, anyway! Git hawses, ever'body! We'll run that jasper down if it takes ev'ry human in th' county to do it!

"Cut Ben loose, dammit! Can't yuh see he's tied!"

Cliff felt Red heave under him and a white picket fence loomed beneath the horse's girth. Landing in the next street, he turned readily when Cliff knee-guided him to the right, when he thought he heard hoofbeats in the gloom to his left.

It was a bad guess. Red had taken less than a dozen strides when a pale splotch in front of him proved to be a white bronc, whose rider had reined in and was turning his mount sidewise to get free gun-play.

Cliff swerved Red a little, touched him with the spur. Twelve hundred pounds of straining horseflesh hurled itself against the little white pony and it went down like a tenpin. Only knocked out of his stride, Red recovered quickly and swept on—Cliff didn't know exactly where, didn't care so long as he was getting away from Tumbleweed. Five minutes later, he was on the open prairie. In another quarter of an hour, he had circled the town and was searching for the trail that led toward the badlands. "No friends there, but it's th' safest place I know, right now," he mused, slowing Red to a steady lope as the trail appeared, a pale ribbon in the light of the rising moon. "They's telephones on this range an' Hawkface'll have th' trails south an' east covered, 'fore mornin'."

Turning into the bridle-path, Cliff stopped and shook a gauntleted fist at the twinkling lights of the town: "I'm leavin' yuh, an' damn glad to do it," he said. "But somethin' tells me that I'm comin' back, some day—an' will make yuh an' yur damn little sheriff like it, at that!

"C'mon, Red, ol' timer! Here's where me an' yuh throw in with th' wild bunch, fur a while. We'll make th' rest of 'em look like singin' evangelists, alongside us!"

CHAPTER III
THE WILD BUNCH

NOONTIME held the sizzling badlands in a lazy lethargy as Cliff turned Red out of the mouth of a deepening rock-wash the tortuous course of which he had been following since a little after sunrise. The wash had opened into a basinlike valley that held the first vegetation Cliff had seen since leaving the knoll, on the roof of which he and Red had spent the late hours of the night in the heart of a cedar grove, Cliff dozing fitfully with Red's picket rope tied to his wrist. Earlier, they had spent several hours playing tag with squads of men Hawkface had rushed to the prairie in a vigorous attempt to round up his escaped prisoner before daylight made it practical for him to enter the rough country. Red had outfooted the mounts of the possemen with effortless ease, the only

close nip coming when they almost ran into one squad of pursuers while fleeing from another.

The horse was tired, gaunt from lack of grain and grass, his hair cased in a dried paste of mingled sweat and dust. His rider had the brim of his hat slanted down to fend off the sunglare from eyes that were red-rimmed from fatigue, lack of sleep and the stinging alkali dust that caked his brows and lashes and sifted through his clothes to fill every pore in his body.

Cliff looked the basin over interestedly. There was good bunchgrass everywhere above the rocky floor. Running at right angles to the wash he had just left was a trickle of water, and a half-mile or so to northward he caught the glimmer of a pool. The floor of the little valley sloped upward for a few hundred feet on all sides, ending in a low, abrupt cliff-wall that loomed chalk-white through the waving tree tops. The puncher's interest quickened when, among the impish little heat-devils that danced along the western rim he saw a panel of pole fence where a break in the white wall indicated a ravine leading down from the upper level. A grey blue haze hanging over the slope north of the ravine showed that a fire had been burning there, though no column of smoke was visible, now.

Cliff turned Red northward toward the smoke haze. He rode carelessly, his supple body slouched at ease, both hands locked about the horn. Though he did not look back to see, some intangible inner sense told him that his progress was being watched by someone back of him—probably a lookout man somewhere about the mouth of the wash, where he had entered.

For the puncher was certain now that he was in an outlaws' hide-out. But there was nothing furtive in his movements as he jogged to the little lake and swung down to loosen the cinches and let Red drink. Before remounting, he laved his face and hands. He was drying them on his black silk neckcloth as he turned the northwest curve of the lake and came upon the camp he knew must be located somewhere near.

There was a small clearing, a fire that had been burned down to ruddy, smokeless coals above which a hindquarter of beef was browning on an iron spit resting on two forked stakes. A greasy looking man in duck pants and a knit undershirt was cutting slices of meat from the haunch with a long-bladed butcher-knife and stacking the cuts into a big bake pan he had set on a near-by stump. He glanced up at Red's approach, then went on with his hacking.

Beyond the fire were five tents. Through the tied-back flaps of one of them which was larger than the others, Cliff saw a long table with cups and plates for a dozen men ranged on it. The other tents were sleeping quarters and in and about them were rough, bearded men who came to the open to stare curiously at the newcomer. Cliff counted fifteen saddles straddling poles lashed to trees back of the tents. He rode straight up to the fire, swung down, started stripping the gear off Red. Every second, he expected one of the men to address him—perhaps in a hostile way, perhaps otherwise. That was a gamble, as he well knew. But they only gaped questioningly as he slapped Red lightly on the rump easing the saddle off as the horse moved away to graze.

Cliff hung his rig on a pole with some others, then came to the front and looked the silent men over, spotting a bearded, scowling man as their leader at once.

He was a giant of a man, swarthy with a circular black beard that was greatly in need of trimming and combing. Seated on a sack of grain in front of one of the tents, he was smoking a black clay pipe and appraising his visitor scowlingly.

"I gotta announcement to make—two of 'em, rather," Cliff told him, thickly. "My hawse there can outrun anything that wears hair, one jump or from hell to breakfast. He can pull more on a lass than any other hawse, anywheres.

"That's about th' hawse. What I gotta

say for myself is that I can out-shoot, out-ride, out-rope, out-run, throw down or whip any son-of-a-coyote in this camp."

The big man's scowl changed to a grin that was equally ferocious: "What's yur style of fightin'—square stand up an' knock-down, or rough and tumble?"

"Either way. That's up to th' other feller. I don't care what kinda lickin' I give him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeh."

THE big man turned to another as tall, though not as heavy as himself. "Cuff th' geezer down fur me, Dago," he nodded in a matter-of-fact way, then crossed his massive legs and leaned back comfortably to watch.

Without warning, the man called Dago lunged so quickly that Cliff's first notice of his attack was when a bony fist swished toward his head with power enough to beat down a bull. Unable to avoid the blow entirely, Cliff stepped inside the sweep of it, the big fist flailing on around and landing between his shoulder blades with a jarring thump that shook the puncher to his toes. Before he could entirely recover his balance a straight left landed high on the side of his head sending him spinning.

Dago's ebon hair appeared to bristle in the sunlight, and his dark eyes blazed with fighting spirit—killer instinct—as he bored in to make the killing. Wishing to make a quick finish of it, he feinted with his left to draw Cliff's guard down, then launched a straight right that had every ounce of him behind it.

It was a flagrant error. Ignoring the feint, Cliff ducked inside again delivering a snappy left uppercut to the jaw that stood the giant on tiptoe; a second later, he expelled his breath with a grunt when Cliff's right crashed into his solar plexus, the lighter man dancing away without taking anything in return.

Again Dago attacked, this time blindly, head down, his long arms sweeping ahead of him with a cyclelike motion. He saw a left hook coming toward his jaw, and turned his head away, only to stick his chin into another whistling right that lifted him off his feet and spun him half around. Back on his heels when he landed, he wilted gradually before a fusillade of vicious rights and lefts that landed with the regularity of a clock ticking.

The bearded man on the grain sack rose and stretched, then stepped between them. "That'll be 'nuff, feller. I wanta use Dago special t'morrow. Don't wear him out complete."

Cliff stepped back, but Dago came at him again, lips puffed and bleeding, one eye partially closed, but still game and willing. "I'll knock yur head off yet," he grated, but the bearded man caught him by the shoulders and thrust him toward the lake.

"Go wash up," he advised. "Stick yur head under for awhile. When that stuff yuh call yur brain cools off yuh'll know this ranny kin lick a fifteen-acre corral full of Dagos, an' not git up a sweat."

Dago scowled at Cliff, his white teeth showing wolfishly. "I'll git yuh fur this," he grated, savagely, then turned and strode toward the lake.

Bull turned to Cliff. "Well, Waddy, I gotta say this fur yuh: Yuh're the first big-mouthed galoot I ever seen that can make good.

"Now, what is it yuh want here?"

"I wants some oats for my hawse, a box of forty-five shells, some chuck an' a place to bed down while I ketch 'bout twenty-four hours' sleep."

The other nodded understandingly. "Law's been hittin' yuh on the rump, eh?"

"Yeh. I busted jail at Tumbleweed, las' night."

"Wha-a-t?" Bull's bearded jaw sagged and his muddy eyes rounded.

"Yeh. Got th' drop on th' gazabo they call Ben, knockt Joe an' Hawkface out, an' rambled. My trail's plenty hot."

The big man slapped his massive thigh and roared in delight, after a suspicious scrutiny of the puncher had convinced him that he was hearing the truth. "He-he-he! Haw-haw-haw! Busted Hawkface's jail, eh? Hawg-tied Ben, eh? Gun-whipped Joe an' Hawkface hisself, eh?

"Howlin' catymounts, but won't the Boss hug hisself when he hears 'bout all that?"

It was Cliff's turn to show surprise. "Th' Boss? Why, I thought you was him!"

Bull looked at him ferociously, then pityingly. "Me, I'm just Bull Dobbs. I rod this here bunch th' way th' Boss tells me to.

"Th' Boss—well, feller, he's just th' Boss. Anybody that tried to find out any more than that don't have no luck aroun' here. Fact is, a coupla curious-minded cusses has found out at diff'rent times. They never told nobody, though, an' they never will. I'm th' only geezer that knows who th' Boss is, or needs to know.

"I'm tellin' yuh all this fur yur own good. They's oats in that sack I was settin' on. Plenty of forty-fives in that box in th' fur end of th' second tent. Chuck'll be ready in a little while. When yuh git fed up yuh kin hit th' trail or stay with us, just as yuh like. That's th' law here in th' Badlands—free bed an' board for any gazabo that th' sheriff don't like."

BULL eyed the puncher through narrowed lids as he added: "Th' Boss is a suspicious cuss, though. That jail-break story of yours is gonna take a lotta tellin'.

"Yuh see, smart sheriffs had tried to bumfuzzle us by stagin' phoney chases—sendin' us decoy ducks, yuh know. I ain't sayin' that th' Boss won't think of somethin' like that when I tell him that yuh broke fence on Hawkface—not that I'll hafta tell him 'bout it, fur that matter. He's heard 'bout it, long 'fore this. Th' only question 'll be whether he believes it or not."

"Don't know's I'd tell him anything 'bout it," Cliff said, unconcernedly. "I told Hawkface th' truth, an' he wouldn't believe it. How am I gonna know if this Boss feller believes it or not?"

"If he believes it, yuh'll know it," Bull said, meaningly. "If he don't believe it, yuh won't know a damn thing, no more."

Cliff fed Red, groomed him thoroly and turned him out, then ate heartily of the roast beef, potatoes and biscuits the greasy cook heaped on the table in the mess tent. Followed as it was by his favorite dessert, apple dumplings, the meal was most satisfying, and Cliff enjoyed it greatly. After they had eaten, Bull took him to his own tent where he showed him a bunk. "Sleep yur head off," he said hospitably, and left. Thoroly worn, Cliff threw himself on the bunk, and was asleep almost before his healthy young body had touched the blanket. At dusk he rose, cared for his horse, ate and went to sleep again. Another day's sun was shining in between the tent flaps when he awoke to find that Bull Dobbs was pulling at his foot and grinning down at him. "Wake up, Waddy! I went an' seen th' Boss las' night. Yuh seem to stand awright with him, 'cause he's laid out some work fur yuh."

"What kinda work?" Cliff asked, as he rose and reached for his trousers.

"Easy work," Bull answered with a casualness Cliff knew was assumed. "Yuh're to rustle beef fur th' camp. It ain't no trick a-tall. Yuh just take a pack-hawse an' go knock a steer over an' skin out th' hindquarters an' fetch 'em in.

"I'm cautionin' yuh 'bout one thing, though. Do yur work in Black Rock county. Don't git over inta Tumbleweed."

"Kinda looks like that means we don't chaw nothin' but Circle-Eight beef," Cliff observed.

Bull's bearded face flamed and his muddy eyes glinted maliciously. "Never mind what it looks like," he growled. "Keep clost to th' Badlands when yuh're rustlin'."

"But Lem Tucker was kilt east of th' line," Cliff couldn't help saying.

"Yeh," Bull grunted. "But that was be-

cause he ketched up with—I mean that's none of yur damn bizness."

"Hawkface thinks it was," Cliff said, to change the subject. His mind was working busily. He had not a doubt that Bull knew how Tucker came to be killed, and by whom. He decided then and there that, by some means, he would solve the puzzle, and clear himself.

The puncher decided another thing, also. He had sought refuge with the outlaws because he knew nothing better to do. In that frame of mind, he would have fought the law in defense of his own life. But, to become a cheap beef rustler—he just couldn't entertain the thought. He was convinced, too, that the mysterious boss had given him the beef-hunting job as a test. In all probability he would be watched. If he brought in the beef, he would be accepted as a blood brother; if he didn't—Cliff could almost feel the slugs entering his spine. He didn't intend to bring in the beef, and he didn't intend to be shot as a deserter. But all he said was, "Well, if yuh geezers likes th' flavor of Circle-Eight beef, an' think it's th' healthiest, that suits me."

"It's the healthiest kind fur yuh to fetch," Bull rumbled, meaningly.

CHAPTER IV
DOUBLE TROUBLE

THE sun was an hour high when Cliff rode out of the green walled little valley following the route by which he had entered it, and leading a fat pack-horse. He was not surprised when Bull, Dago and another bandit called Ike accompanied him "to show th' way," as Bull explained. After they had left the wash near the knoll, Bull ordered Dago to scout ahead along the edge of the Badlands. Ike rode due eastward "to keep watch that-a-way" and soon was lost in the brush. When Bull dropped a little way to the rear, Cliff knew that they had him cut off on three sides, with the impenetrable Badlands as a barrier in the fourth direction. He knew, too, that they would keep him in that position until he returned to the wash with the beef or showed his hand by attempting to escape—in which case they would close in on him with the odds decidedly in their favor.

"Wal, hop to it, Waddy," Bull called from the rear. "We've showed yuh th' layout an' they's cattle on ahead. We want yuh to do th' job all by yur lonesome, like yuh'll hafta do, next time."

"Reckon I can shoot straight 'nuff to kill a steer an' my knife's sharp 'nuff to skin one," Cliff called back, then stirred Red lightly with his heel and jogged briskly northward, where a number of scattered black dots showed between the edge of the Badlands and a strip of cottonwood timber that paralleled it at a distance of a hundred yards or so. As he rode, he noted that Dago had disappeared, and assumed that he was in the timber, as Ike doubtless was. A glance to the rear showed that Bull was edging gradually toward the trees. "Nice layout, Ol' Scout," Cliff told Red. "If we bust fur th' timber, they'll git t'gether an' gun us 'thout givin' us sight of 'em. If we try to go 'head or double back, either Bull or that self-hatin' Dago'll git a fair crack at us.

"Here's where we gotta chill some beef."

THE first cattle Cliff encountered proved to be mother cows that had hidden their calves in the swales while grazing. Next, he rode through a small bunch containing dry cows, a few yearlings and a shaggy-headed White-face bull that bellowed and pawed dirt as he passed. Close to the edge of the Badlands were two steers that would have made fair beef, but Cliff seemed to be extremely choicy. After stopping and riding around them as though in doubt, he rode on toward a larger bunch a quarter of a mile away.

A line-back cow in fair flesh was at the near end of this bunch. Like the steers, she would make fair beef, so Cliff made a pre-

tense of looking her over. He could "feel" unseen eyes of the three watching his every movement from the timber as he cut in between her and the rough and paused to examine her. To make his bluff good, he drew his saddle-gun from its sheath in the skirts, leveled it, then lowered it as though in doubt.

Then, on past the cow and almost in line with her, he saw a blaze-faced dun horse poke its head and neck from behind a screen of bushes at the edge of the timber. The horse was saddled and evidently was being watched by its master, for a man's flanneled arm appeared, the hand catching the bit and jerking the horse back and out of sight. Cliff had but a momentary glimpse of the beast's head and neck, but he knew that if he ever saw it again, he would recognize it by the peculiar blaze in its face, which had the form of a star on the forehead, a strip, a perfect diamond, then another strip that reached to the muzzle.

"Huh," the puncher shrugged. "They wasn't no hawse like that back in th' valley. Must be that boss feller has been waitin' here to take a squint at me, personal."

To cover the fact that he had seen the lurker, he rode around the cow again as though he had eyes for nothing else. When he passed her up, it was not because she wasn't entirely fit to be butchered, but because killing an animal at the very edge of the Badlands didn't fit into certain plans he had formed after leaving the other men.

Then, when he came up to the bunch, he saw what he wanted. On the eastern edge of the little band, and not fifty yards from the timber, was a brockle-faced steer that was market fat. It was grazing apart from the others, with its head away from him and when he cut in between it and the others, it became alarmed—as he had hoped it would—and shambled away from him, circling even nearer to the timber when he dropped the packer's rope and shook Red into a gallop.

The rifle came up, steadied, spat its lead. Struck through the lungs and flinching away from the slug as an animal invariably does, the steer made a succession of spasmodic plunges to the right that carried it almost into the timber before it sprawled on the sod, blood gushing in twin streams from its nostrils as it pawed and bellowed in death agony.

Steeling himself to act casually now that the moment of tension had come, Cliff levered out the empty, sheathed the rifle. His hand was dangling carelessly within inches of his right hip as he started Red toward the dying beef, unhooking his right foot from the stirrup as though about to swing down.

What followed was a swirl of roiled action so swift that, had a spectator been there, he could not have kept up with it. In one clock-tick, Cliff regained his stirrup, twitched Red's rein, prompted him with the spur, cuffing out his six as the horse rammed through the brush.

In a flash, the puncher saw Dago rear up to meet him, his rifle jerking up to a level, behind it a dark, furrowed face distorted with killer's lust. Beyond him, and a little to the left was a moving form that Cliff took to be Ike.

The six and Dago's rifle spoke almost in unison as Red reared and pivoted in response to a twitch of the rein.

Cliff felt the suck of a slug that sang past his cheek, thudding into the flesh of one of the cow brutes and sending the bunch off in a wild stampede northward.

A split-wink showed that Dago was swaying on his feet, the muzzle of his rifle traveling in a wavering half circle. Paying no more attention to him, Cliff fired past him at Ike, who had been slower to grasp the situation and come into action. The puncher had barely time to see Ike crumple in his tracks and fall across Dago's prostrate body, before brush crackled to southward and Bull showed fifty yards away, working diagonally into the timber as he spurred his horse for all he was worth.

The puncher's six spoke again. Struck between the eyes, Bull's big iron grey gelding wheel-barrowed forward, and fell threshing among the bushes, evidently pinning his rider's leg as Cliff could hear Bull grunting and cursing as he struggled to wrench himself free.

Cliff's known enemies were down; but the owner of the buckskin horse still was to be accounted for, and there might be others lying in wait ahead. Cliff turned at a right angle and bore directly into the timber. As he left the brush for the trees, a rifle spoke in a succession of angry blares back toward the knoll and bullets clipped brush at the spot he had just left. Immediately following that, came the hoofbeats of a horse coming up rapidly from the vicinity in which he had seen the dun. Without pausing to investigate, Cliff rode straight east through the cottonwoods, leaving them after a quarter of a mile to surge northward on a belt of prairie that intervened between the timber and the dunes.

The sound of the other running horse came faintly now when Red's own hoofbeats were muffled in the softer footing of a sand flat. A little later, men's voices were heard, and at least three other horses joined the first, all of them holding straight northward. At the same time a popping of brush and pound of hooves to Cliff's left told that still other riders were crossing the timber belt.

Cliff couldn't go east into Tumbleweed territory, which doubtless was being combed under Hawkface's direction. Perhaps the rider of the dun and the other pursuers were the peppery little sheriff's men. To turn southward would only lead him back to the Badlands or into a southeastern trail that he knew must be covered. There was but one thing to do, and he did it. Holstering his six, he turned northward and called for all that Red had. The big bay leveled out and ran cleanly, gamely. Although, because he had crossed the timber belt and they hadn't, the men on the other side had been ahead of him, he found that he was abreast of them, after Red had run a gruelling mile through the soft, hot sand. Pistol-fire directly behind him told that those who had crossed were in the open and had sighted him, but Red soon drew away from them, and the firing ceased.

As the eastern line of the cottonwoods curved westward, while the west line ran practically straight, Red had to outfoot the other horses badly. And Red did just that, for when after another two or three miles, the timber pointed, there was not a visible enemy in Cliff's rear on the eastern side, while the four on the western side were strung out badly, their leader—the rider of the dun—being a long quarter behind, and losing ground rapidly.

Unworried now, Cliff patted Red's lathering neck and eased him to a sweeping gallop. Within another minute, the man on the dun reined in, waiting for the others. They huddled for a little time, then turned back—to investigate the scene of the shooting, Cliff guessed.

THE way northwest now appeared open. Whether he would find a refuge or a trap, Cliff couldn't say, but he headed that way. Five minutes later, he reached a little stream which he knew must be Badger Creek. Riding down into the gravelly bed, he loosened the cinches and allowed Red to sip a little water and regain his wind. He had retightened the girths, remounted, and was starting across the narrow stream when Red threw his velvety muzzle up to sift the light breeze, then stopped and tilted his ears forward snorting suspiciously.

Cliff looked quickly at the brush-lined bank ahead, and had started a hand toward his holster when he stiffened to inactivity, every nerve in his body taut again.

To the left of the narrow path that cut up the band ahead, was a low-growing, dense-topped box alder. From among its boughs projected the blue steel barrel of a saddle

gun, the frowning muzzle of which bore unwaveringly on Cliff's chest. Back of the muzzle, he could see a gauntleted hand clasping the fore-grip and another hand with the forefinger on the trigger. Below the gun, a splotch of grey flannel shirt and a splash of red neckcloth showed intermittently as they were covered and uncovered by the leafy, wind-stirred boughs. The rifle was not two yards from Cliff's breast; the hands that held it were steady as the bole of the big cottonwood that stood beyond. It was trail's end for Cliff, if the other fellow so willed it.

For a half minute, there was no sound or motion at the creek crossing save the play of the vagrant wind among the tree-tops, the cheerful chirrup of a wild canary somewhere in the top of the lofty cottonwood, and the gentle ripple of the dawdling stream.

Red stood staunch, but Cliff could feel the big horse quiver under him as the seconds passed. The holder of the rifle neither moved nor spoke. It was as though the finger that lay on that fateful trigger was waiting for some movement on Cliff's part to cause it to press back and end his life. Something told him that it was as if his life was suspended by a thread, and a knife-edge was bearing against that thread.

CHAPTER V
THE HUNCH

CLIFF was the first to speak, even his steel nerves commencing to twitch under the strain of the intolerable silence and inactivity. "Well, go 'head an' say it," he suggested, shrugging his muscular shoulders. "Do I put 'em up, peel my hips, or just stay put an' wait for yur slug?"

The puncher could only stare stupidly, overwhelmed with astonishment when a voice came back—a soft, flutelike voice that held a tremor, yet was vibrant with flinty determination: "Unbuckle your belt and loop it over the horn with the holster underneath." Then, after Cliff had complied: "Now ride slowly up here. Remember, a quick move brings a bullet!"

If Cliff had been astonished upon hearing a *woman's* voice, he was half-dazed when he stopped Red on the upper level and she stepped from behind the trees and confronted him, the rifle still bearing on his breast.

She was young, slender, indescribably supple and graceful in her every movement as she stepped nearer and scrutinized him with deep blue eyes that seemed to lend a glint to the glory of amber hair that showed below the brim of her pearl hat. Even the tension of the moment did not prevent Cliff from noting the neat fit of her grey flannel shirt and skirt, the jaunty bow in her flowing red silk tie, the smallness and neatness of her picturated calfskin boots. Her face was chalk-white with excitement, but her mouth was set in grim lines that somehow appeared out of place there.

"Well?" Cliff found breath to say inquiringly, after they had looked at each other for a time in silence.

Her lips barely moved as she asked: "Aren't you the man who escaped from jail at Tumbleweed?"

"I shore am, but—"

"Oh," she gasped, "why don't you *do* something, then—"

"Do what?"

"Anything—just anything! Reach for your six! Start your horse and try to escape! *Anything,* so I can bring myself to shoot you! I ought to do it! I *must* do it! But, I just can't while you only sit there and look at me!"

"I wouldn't be so squeamish," Cliff told her. "Almost ev'ry human I've met up with on this range has tried to gun me some or hang me or somethin'. I don't want yuh to feel slighted none, an' far be it from me to deny a lady her pleasures. Before yuh start to squirt any lead, though, maybe yuh

wouldn't mind tellin' me just why yuh're hankerin' to massacre me."

"I am Lucile Tucker—Lem Tucker's daughter. I mustn't let you get away, and I'm afraid to try to take you home or to town, you're so desperate and resourceful. So, if you have anything to say—"

"I have—an' it'll be a mouthful. First place, let me say that yuh're so dern pritty yuh got me kinda buffaloed—eyes is so full of girl that my tongue won't work just right.

"Secont place, I never kilt yur dad none whatever. I never even seen or heard of him until he had been dead for hours.

"Third place, yuh ain't gonna gun me none, an' yuh know it. A bit ago, yuh was so plumb quiet that I thought I was a gonner; but yuh've started to talkin' now, an' when talkin' starts, shootin' is postponed indefinite."

"But, I'm Lem Tucker's daughter, and the Tuckers stand up for the Tuckers," she argued. But Cliff saw that the grim lines about her mouth had relaxed a little. The muzzle of the rifle had commenced to sway uncertainly. Her trim shoulders shook as she went on, unsteadily: "I'm a Tucker through and through, the only Tucker left, but—oh, I just don't know *what* to do!"

"That's easy. Just lean that gun 'ginst th' cottonwood an' set down on that slab an' we'll talk sense for a spell."

She started to protest, but Cliff turned his back to her to swing out of saddle, then ignored the rifle and walked past her to the rocky slab in the shade. "Set down," he suggested again. "Yuh're all het up, an' it's cool here."

She hesitated. "But I rode down here because I heard shooting a while ago, and now I find you here. How do I know you haven't killed another man."

"I did—two of 'em, I reckon."

"Why you—" She swung the rifle to cover him, but Cliff looked another way, shaking his head thoughtfully.

"Must be I look like a cussed mutton thief," he said, as though speaking to some third person. "She just won't talk to me, none whatever."

"But, you're a killer, and I—Oh!—Oh!—"

Springing pantherishly, Cliff had caught the barrel of the gun with one hand, thrusting the muzzle upward without effort as he said, chidingly: "Killer, eh? 'Fraid I'll kill *you,* eh?" One at a time, he caught her hands and wrenched them gently off the gun, then stepped back and shook it at her. "Killer, eh?

"Well, if I am, what keeps me from pluggin' yuh? I ain't doin' it, am I?" He leaned the piece against the cottonwood where she could reach it handily, then motioned to the slab again. "Shucks! Yuh ain't gonna shoot me with that gun an' yuh can't scare me with it; so forgit it, an' set down an' we'll palaver, sensible."

SHE seated herself, still eyeing him steadily, but with less and less distrust. He commenced years back and told her all about himself, how he came to her range, and what had happened since. After that had been done, he eased his mind of something that had been bearing heavily on it. "My turn to ketch while yuh pitch," he suggested. "First, though, I gotta question to ask: What geezer in this man's country rides a big claybank hawse—star an' diamond in its face?"

Her eyes widened. "Why, that's Bill Seal's horse."

"Who's Bill Seal?"

"He's our next neighbor on the north. In fact, his little ranch is a notch in our deeded land, and Father always allowed him to run his stock with ours. Father liked him but I—well, you see he—"

Flushing under Cliff's keen scrutiny, she changed the subject, abruptly. "But why do you ask about his horse?"

"No reason, maybe. Now go 'head an' tell me all 'bout everything."

Though he had spoken carelessly, he was

burning with inner excitement because of a certain theory he had formed. His subconscious mind remained on Bill Seal and the dun horse while he listened to the girl.

It was a simple story not unfamiliar to the old West. Tucker had begun as a small rancher, built up the big Circle-Eight, then had commenced to suffer losses by rustlers. The losses had grown heavier as the years passed, and brought him to the point of ruin. Always the rustlers worked on the Black Rock portion of his widespread ranch, so Hawkface Gibbons took no action.

When Cliff asked why Tucker hadn't kept the cattle on the Tumbleweed side, she explained that he had tried to do that, but in spite of all the precautions he had taken some had strayed westward, from time to time, invariably to be run off. Once, just before a storm, fully half his stock had stampeded toward the Badlands, only a few of them ever having been recovered.

"How old is this Bill Seal feller?" Cliff interrupted her once to ask.

"About thirty-five, I should say."

"Pretty much interested in yuh Tuckers?"

"Well, he always has wanted to get hold of the Circle-Eight land. He still is trying to buy it."

"Is th' land th' only thing on th' Circle-Eight that he wants to ketch hold of?"

Her oval face crimsoned. "He wants me, too."

Cliff nodded in confirmation of an inner thought, and she resumed her story. By the time she had finished, Cliff had put two and two together and arrived at a fixed conclusion. When she prepared to mount the chestnut filly she had tied back of the box elder, he assisted her up, then patted her arm in a brotherly fashion. "Keep yuh chin up, girl," he advised, cheerfully. "We ain't licked yet by a dang sight."

She gave him a startled look. "You said *we!*"

"Yeh. I said *we,* an' I meant *we.*

"I'm gonna salt myself in on this range an' browse aroun' here till these rustlers gits off yur neck. Incidental, just to clean my own slate, I'm gonna throw a loop on th' galoot that kilt yur dad."

She extended a gauntleted hand, her deep blue eyes suspiciously moist. "And I came near shooting you."

"I wouldn't have cared," he told her gallantly and brazenly. "I'd rather be shot by you than hugged enthusiastic by any other woman I ever seen."

She flushed rosy, bit her lip, but could not resist giving him a smile that made him fairly dizzy. Then she collected her wits and said, primly, "That's rather bold talk, coming from a stranger."

"I ain't no stranger," he came back, decisively. "I've knowed yuh a hundred years, but time just seems shorter.

"Now ooze along home an' don't worry none, an' don't tell nobody yuh met up with this ol' dew-drinkin' maverick.

"Me, I'm gonna drift over to Black Rock, for th' time bein'."

She gave him an anxious look. "But, Black Rock's an awful place. I'm afraid you'll never come back."

"Kinda wondered about that myself, a while ago, but I ain't guessin' about it no more," he told her. "After meetin' you, I've made up my mind definite. I'm comin' back."

After she had ridden eastward, her amber hair glinting in the sunlight as she swayed easily to the filly's canter, he turned Red northward and "talked" with him as is a plainsman's habit:

"Got a hunch, Red, ol' pard. They run them Circle-Eight cows over inta that valley in th' Badlands where nobody 'ud think of lookin' fur 'em. Then, after th' excitement has died down, they shoot 'em out through that gate I seen on th' far side, an' trail 'em off to market.

"They didn't go on th' Tumbleweed range to git them cows, though. They didn't hafta. Somebody always steered th'

cows acrost th' line where they could pick 'em up.

"That ain't all, Ol' Hawse. 'Cordin' to what Bull *almost* said, Tucker was kilt when he ketched that 'somebody' helpin' his cows go west where th' rustlers could git 'em.

"That's just a hunch, mostly. It's gonna be hard to prove, but we *gotta* do it."

CHAPTER VI

BLACK ROCK

IT WAS high noon when Cliff jogged into Black Rock amid a sudden flurry of hurtling raindrops that spattered up white globules of rock dust from the narrow street, then dissolved them in mid-air. Winking the water out of his eyes, he rode around the irregular triangle that comprised the business section.

He was struck at once by the peculiar aspect of the little village. The north side of the triangle was almost equal to the southeast and southwest sides combined; on it were substantial, well-kept buildings that housed a bank, the postoffice, a big general store, a small hotel, a tidy little drug store and a well appointed saloon.

A dingy feedlot, a dingier blacksmith shop, a disreputable looking cafe and a poolhall occupied the southwest line of the triangle. The southeast was given over to a saloon, a dance hall, a boot-maker's shop, and two disconsolate vacant buildings.

With the exception of the north side, which looked as though it really belonged in some other town, the buildings all were flimsy, unpainted, false-fronted structures that gave no promise of permanency—more like the buildings in a mushroom mining town the future of which was uncertain.

Giving particular attention to the saloons, Cliff decided that they were entirely emblematic of the two sections. The one was attractively furnished, and its few patrons apepared to be substantial business men who had dropped in for refreshment. The single word, BAR, appeared in gilt letters on the plate glass. The other was unpainted without and within and its unpolished bar was lined with rough, unshaven men who fitted in well with the sign that was scrawled crudely across the false front:

RUSTLERS' ROOST
Blinky Morgan, Prop.

Another circumstance spoke eloquently of the different conditions in the two sections. Matronly looking women had sought refuge from the shower in the stores and under the awnings on the north side; not a female was visible elsewhere. "Looks like somebody had cut two towns in two an' got th' pieces mixed when he chucked 'em together again," Cliff mused, as he headed Red toward the ramshackle feedlot, where a rheumy-eyed proprietor with a tobacco stained full beard acquiesced in a surly way when Cliff turned Red into the only box stall about the establishment, gave him a full feed of oats and stood by to see that he was allowed to eat the last grain. Then, after grooming and watering the horse, he hung his gear and chaps in the stuffy little office and started out to get the feel of the town.

AS CLIFF left the feedlot, sounds of commotion caused him to look toward the *Rustlers'* Roost in time to see the shutter door bang open and a tall man in range attire hurtle across the walk and chug into the trickle of water in the gutter. As he scrambled up and started to regain the walk, a burly man in a dirty white apron strode from the saloon and kicked him full in the face, knocking him flat again. As the bloody-faced fallen one arose and weaved drunkenly across the street to disappear into the vacant space between the bank and the postoffice, coarse, derisive laughter broke out within the *Rustlers' Roost* and among the bearded men who had crowded from it to the sidewalk. They still appeared to be enjoying the sordid spectacle hugely

when the bartender brushed his knuckles on a corner of his soiled apron and led the way back inside. When Cliff passed, a few moments later, they were lined up at the bar, laughing boisterously as the bartender set out a round of drinks—in celebration of the result of the one-sided fight, Cliff surmised.

Cliff had intended to visit the *Rustlers' Roost* at once, as he recognized it as the toughest spot in town, and he had no intention of shying away from trouble. But he saw that the other place was decent, and decided to announce his decency by visiting it first. As he went on down the block and crossed, he was aware that people everywhere were observing him curiously—probably because he was recognized as the only living person who had had a run-in with Hawkface Gibbons and come out of it unharmed.

The proprietor addressed him politely when he entered the place and lounged up to the bar. He was a pleasant faced man with a close-cropped moustache and shell rim nose glasses that gave him a distinguished look entirely in keeping with the ornate appearance of the place. Discovering that there was a lunch counter in the rear, Cliff ordered fried chicken and carried his bottle of beer back there. As he was eating, a squatty little man in a linen suit and with a pen back of his ear entered and sipped slowly at the contents of a tall, frosty glass that the proprietor set out without waiting for it to be ordered. Observing them out of the corner of his eye, Cliff saw that they watched him aslant, discussing him in tones too low to be overheard. Looking the patron over, he saw that he was past middle age, and evidently a personage of importance. He was florid faced, bald from brow to neck, with a tuft of greying hair over each ear. He talked in crisp, choppy sentences, gesticulating emphatically. Cliff was not surprised when another patron entered and addressed the bald man as "Judge."

Cliff had finished his chicken and was consuming his apple pie with a second bottle of beer when he was surprised to see the little man come mincing toward him. "Excuse me," he said, in a high-pitched voice ludicrously out of keeping with his fat body. "I am J. D. Cook, ex-county judge, also president of the First National, you know."

Mystified, Cliff gave him his own name, and the judge chuckled. "Yes-yes. So I've heard. You see, your reputation got here ahead of you." He shook his head soberly. "Not that I can countenance jail breaking and the slugging of officers. No-no; not at all.

"Still, your situation was rather—er—irregular, and Hawkface Gibbons is inclined to be somewhat—er—well, we'll say impulsive." He rocked back on his heels and looked at the ceiling with a judicial frown. "Considering the case from all angles, I am inclined to think that, as you were being deprived of your liberty without due process of law, and were being denied the constitutional right to a trial by jury, you had legal justification for such action as you saw fit to take in defense of your life."

"Much obliged," Cliff told him, still mystified. "Fact is, though, I don't believe your opinion would bother Hawkface very much if he got his hooks on me—which he's never gonna do if I see him first."

"Quite so," the judge agreed, shifting his gaze from the ceiling to Cliff. "Hawkface is a friend of mine, though—a very close friend, I might say. Perhaps if we could—

"But, I may be a little bit premature." He wrinkled his pink forehead and examined the ceiling painstakingly again. "Yes, I consider that I spoke hastily, and without proper deliberation.

"I see that you've about finished your lunch. Might I suggest that you have a drink with us?"

Cliff looked at the few other patrons. "Us?"

"Yes—with Jim Bane and me. Bane's the proprietor, you know. Fine chap. Pub-

lic spirited and all that. He and I serve together on the city government. He's one of the councilmen and I'm mayor."

"Well, well," Cliff drawled as he rose from his stool and started for the bar. "Durned if I can say but that the people up here sent their 'ficial representatives out to greet a passin' pilgrim.

"Hawkface an' two deputies met me outside th' corporation over at Tumbleweed an' insisted that I visit town; they was broken hearted when I left. Now I'm gonna have one on th' city guv'ment of Black Rock. They must be a ketch in this thing somewheres, but I'll be durned if I can figger it out, so name yur poison, Mister Mayor. I'll be right at yur elbow.

"But, if it's a plan to git on th' blind side of me an' ease me inta th' calaboose, I'm tellin' yuh plain that—"

"No-no, not at all," the mayor interjected, hastily, then introduced Cliff to Bane, as they had reached the bar. Bane greeted the puncher genially and apologized for not drinking with him, explaining that he never indulged when on duty. He and Mayor Cook exchanged knowing looks as they chatted for a short time. Finally the mayor looked at the clock and almost bolted for the door. "Tut-tut! Don't tempt me with another one. Due at the bank. Two minutes late, now. Drop in and see me some time this afternoon, Rudd. May have a proposition for you. Come about four, if that suits you."

Rain was falling steadily as Cliff started from the barroom, but he left his slicker with Bane. It wouldn't do to have that gun-butt curtained. It had been his intention to go directly to the *Rustlers' Roost;* but when he got outside, he turned northward, instead. For, just being tied to the rail in front of the postoffice, was a big dun gelding with a star and diamond in his face. The rider, who Cliff knew must be Bill Seal, was just stepping to the walk. Sighting Cliff, he stopped and looked the puncher over with a cool, cynical deliberation that was an insult in itself.

He was tall, with a well-knit body that suggested strength, agility and stamina. His hair was sandy, and his pale eyes were almost hidden between near-closed lids that somehow gave them a chill, calculating look. A loose mouth with over-full sensuous lips, combined with a bulldog jaw, made up a countenance that was anything but attractive. As Cliff lounged past, he opened his thick lips as though about to speak, then altered his intention and stumped into the postoffice.

STANDING on the walk in front of the *Rustlers' Roost,* Cliff looked over the shutter door. The room was long, low-ceiled, with a litter of sawdust on the floor that did not look as though it had been renewed for weeks. Fringing the bar were a half-dozen hard-faced men who were drinking silently, paying little attention to each other. In chairs and leaning along the opposite wall, an equal number of bleary-eyed loafers watched the drinkers with that patient hopefulness that never grows dim in the heart of the confirmed moocher.

On the wall back of the cigar counter was a framed sign that read:

> IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHO'S THE BOSS AROUND HERE JUST START SOMETHING.

Cliff gave particular attention to the man behind the bar. He was pock-marked, shaggy headed with a nose that was a mere button above his yellow-fanged mouth. A livid scar that involved the empty socket where an eye had been, ran diagonally down his cheek, curving to a stop below the ear. The good eye was wide open, restless, so filled with sinister avarice that Cliff fairly shuddered with revulsion as he shoved the shutter open and entered. The swinging door had scarcely swung to behind him

when he sensed something ominous in the air—some intangible, danger-fraught tension which could be felt but not seen.

The tobacco-fumed, booze-stunk room had grown suddenly still. The first to see him, the loafers by the wall stiffened to attention. As he passed along the bar to take station by the big ice box at its far end, he saw the drinkers watch his progress scowlingly in the fly-specked mirror of the back-bar.

Though he knew that he was entering a tough place, and that he was a marked man both by the law and Badland bandits, Cliff was at first unable to account for the ominous hostility all about him.

Then he saw. At a greasy table so near the front of the building that he could not be seen from the outside, sat Bull Dobbs. The big outlaw was eating a steak with a great smacking of his coarse lips. Occasionally he stopped chewing to suck at a pint bottle of whiskey that sat at his elbow. He was facing half way from the bar, and gave no sign that he had seen Cliff. Opposite him sat a cadaverous looking youth in a natty blue serge suit who held a black satchel on his thin knees and spoke monosyllabic answers out of one corner of his crooked mouth when Bull addressed him. He wore no belt, but a bulge under his left armpit indicated a shoulder holster.

So that was it. Bull had brought word to the *Roost* that a member of the Valley gang had refused to become a cheap beef rustler, and had avoided the penalty of disobedience by fighting his way to freedom. Cliff eased around the end of the bar until he was almost behind it, and had the big icebox at his back.

Cliff was ready, now. Though the odds were against him, he had promised Lucile Tucker that he would stay on the range until her troubles were ended. He *had* to keep that promise, and Black Rock was his only refuge—if he could make it so. The test had to come, and he was not in the least disposed to postpone it. But he only leaned one elbow carelessly on the bar and awaited the other fellows' move.

Blinky Morgan appeared in no hurry to wait on his new patron. Seldom taking his eye off Bull, he toweled his way down the bar till he was near Cliff, then asked the stock question of the bartender, through the ages and over the world: "Whatchu gonna have?"

"Ain't drinkin', just now," Cliff told him.

As though relieved, the bartender toweled his way back toward the front, where he stationed himself beside the battered cash register, on a shelf beneath which Cliff had seen a long barreled six and a leather billy.

Then, probably prompted by the stillness of the place, Bull turned his shaggy, unkempt head and saw the puncher. Instantly his muddy eyes fired, and he shoved his chair slowly back from the table and twisted it to bring his right hip to the fore. The youth in the blue serge suit caught the edge of the table, levered his slim body slowly erect and started inching along the wall toward the rear. When he had come almost opposite Cliff, the puncher spoke to him casually:

"Goin' any place in particular, feller?"

The youth stopped in his tracks, his ferret eyes rivited on the puncher's hands, a green-white circle appearing around his crooked mouth. "It makes no difference to you where I go, does it?"

"Yeh, it shore does," Cliff informed him. "Yuh see, when I stumble in among a mess of snakes I admire to have all of 'em stay where I can see their heads. Fur that reason, I'm advisin' yuh not to take another damn step towards th' back."

The youth coughed nervously and the fingers of his right hand opened and closed convulsively as the hand crept slowly toward his left arm-pit. "I didn't ask you for advice," he snarled.

"It's there for yuh. Take it or leave it," Cliff said, evenly. "Free gratis, I'm addin' to it that if yur hand passes them buttons on yur vest, I'm gonna hafta—"

Taking the opportunity when Cliff was arguing with the other, Bull had sprung up, his hand striking at his hip with surprising speed for a man of his bulk.

Four spots in the still room became centers of motion so swift and unexpected that the gaping spectators never could agree afterward as to who drew first, and who went down first.

Cliff's right hand snapped down and up, the forty-five belching flame as it came clear of the leather. A glass in the big icebox crashed and tinkled and a slug clipped Cliff high in the shoulder, starting a warm trickle down his back. Gun smoke spiraled lazily ceilingward, and the pyramided glasses on the back bar clinked to the vibration of the mingled explosions.

The puncher was nicked again now, on the lower side of his left biceps. But the youth in the blue serge suit lay a crumpled heap in the foul sawdust, still holding his grip on the satchel which had broken open, spilling out an assortment of tools. Bull Dobbs had slumped back into his chair, dropping his smoking gun to clasp his lower ribs with both hands, as his shaggy head drooped till it rested on the table edge.

Back of the bar, Blinky Morgan was swearing cold-bloodedly and wrapping a corner of his soiled apron about a hand that had been crushed as it grasped the butt of the gun on the shelf.

STILLNESS gripped the disordered room again. Huddled along the wall, the spectators stood rigid, fearful that any move on their part would be interpreted as hostile.

Voices called in the street and across it. Boot-soles welted the walk and curious faces showed, peering cautiously in at the front windows. Ramming his way through a group that had knotted by the shutter, Bill Seal banged it open and entered, his pale eyes glistening with excitement as he took in the situation at one quick glance. "What's up here?" he growled accusingly, stepping down the room to face the puncher, who had resumed his lolling attitude at the end of the bar.

"Not a big lot," Cliff answered, easily. "I just been gunnin' me a few sidewinders in order to help pass th' time in this dull ol' cowtown." He locked eyes with the rancher as he added, significantly: "I only used three slugs, so I got three left in my hawg-leg. If yuh know anybody that wants to see how them slugs come out, all he's gotta do is to crook his elbow."

Seal's pale eyes flamed and his shoulder hunched for the draw, but he froze into inaction when Blinky Morgan's pain-wracked voice broke out behind him: "Lay off him, Seal! Dammit, this place ain't no morgue! I tell yuh that jasper ain't human! He does things that just can't be did!

" 'Sides that, if yuh happen to remember, we gotta deal on tonight, an' we can't 'ford to have th' gang all shot to—"

"Shut up!" Seal thundered, whirling on Morgan. "Yuh talk too much with that yaller-toothed mouth of your'n!"

Blinky subsided, muttering, but his talk had taken Seal's mind off Cliff, for the time being. The rancher walked over to Bull, caught his sleeve and shook him lightly, asking where he was hurt. Two of the loafers raised the fallen youth and carried his limp body and stretched it out on the bar. Cliff picked up a glass of whiskey some drinker had left untasted, drank it unhurriedly, and as unhurriedly strolled outside, where the throng on the walk opened a way for him. Crossing the triangle, he took to the walk before the residence-office next to the drug-store from which a full-bearded man in a long-tailed frock coat was just emerging, carrying a medical satchel. "Hurt?" he asked, starting to go back in.

"Scratched," Cliff told him. "They's three leaky geezers over there at Blinky's that yuh better go see to, first. They don't 'mount to a damn, an' th' world 'ud be better off without 'em; but people don't look at it that way.

"If it's awright, I'll go set in yur shop till yuh come back."

"Sure! Make yourself at home," Doc told him, then splashed across the sloppy street at a gait that set his flowing coat-tails a-flutter.

THE rain subsided to a drizzle for a time, then beat down harder than before. Cliff sat in the cozy little room wondering just what his standing was in the little town. He had won the first skirmish by the narrowest of margins, but he could not hope to go on winning, indefinitely, even if no mass action was taken in his case. Sooner or later, a gang assault or a shot from the dark would—

The screen squeaked open a little way, and Mayor Cook's round, pink face was poked inside. "Just passing, and stopped to extend my—ah—congratulations. Doc tells me you're not hurt badly. That's good. Fine! Fine!

"In a devil of a hurry, right now. Got some men to see. Don't forget your engagement with me at four."

The screen slapped shut again, and Cliff resumed his musing, now that his attention had been called to it, wondering mightily what the mayor could have to discuss with him.

He wondered, too, about the contents of that little black satchel the youth over at Blinky's had been carrying—cold chisels, drills and strange looking implements Cliff never had seen before. He still was puzzling over things when Doc returned two hours later, smelling strongly of antiseptic and looking exceedingly solemn.

As Cliff was getting out of his shirt, Doc told him that the youthful stranger was dead, and that nobody, including Bull Dobbs, knew who he was or where he had come from. Bull had gotten off luckily by one of those strange freaks of destiny which sometimes save or kill a gun fighter. Cliff's slug had smashed against the big silver watch Bull carried in his waistband pocket, filling the skin there with powdered glass and sickening the big Badlander temporarily. Blinky Morgan's knuckles had been smashed beyond repair.

After disinfecting Cliff's wounds and covering them with cotton and adhesive plaster, Doc pronounced them inconsequential but advised Cliff to rest for a time to avoid bringing on fever. "I have a few calls that must be made, and this rumpus has delayed me unexpectedly. The door has a spring lock. Just shove it to when you leave. I'll try to see you at the bank at four."

"See me about what?" Cliff wanted to know.

"Mayor Cook 'll tell you that." Doc shrugged into his raincoat and bolted out into the smother, leaving behind a puzzled puncher who leaned back in Doc's armchair and thought and thought and thought, while the rain pounded against the staunch little building and dripped monotonously off the eave of the wooden awning.

WHEN Cliff went to the bank at four, he was piloted to a well furnished rear room where he found Mayor Cook sitting at a long table with Bane and a ruddy faced German with a close-cropped dun beard whom the mayor introduced as "August Shultz, another member of the council." Doc came in almost at once, and Cliff could hardly believe his eyes when he saw that Seal was with him. After introducing Doc as "Dr. Livingston, the third member of the council," the mayor made a little speech.

"We have invited Mr. Seal because, now that Tucker is dead, he is the only rancher east of town who trades at Black Rock—at least part of the time. We want him to participate in our deliberations.

"To you, Rudd, I will not attempt to disguise the fact that affairs here in Black Rock are not entirely satisfactory to the substantial business men who have been here since the country was opened.

"Putting it bluntly, we have allowed mat-

ters to drift until the town is in the hands of a vicious element who, for the sake of a few dollars they get weekly from the outlaws and bandits, have practically turned the town over to them, driving away all the decent ranch trade. Also the nesters are moving out now, and we want the business of the small ranchers who will take their place.

"We have discussed this matter a great deal of late, and have come to the conclusion that we must do something. Briefly, Rudd, we want a city marshal who will clean up the town. On account of your—er—undoubted proficiency with a six-gun, we had already decided you were the man. What has transpired today—ah—strengthens that conviction.

"In a nutshell, we offer you two hundred and fifty dollars a month and our moral support, and—"

"Who pays for the ammunition?" Cliff asked. "If I make a complete cleanin', I may need a awful lot of it."

The mayor mopped his pink forehead, obviously amazed at Cliff's readiness to accept. "Why—ah—that is a little—er—irregular, perhaps. Yet, expenditures for necessary ammunitions might be classed as —er—overhead, so—"

"Yuh got yuh a marshal," Cliff announced, rising briskly. "Any special orders?"

The mayor and the councilmen shook their heads gravely. Seal grinned derisively at the puncher, his pale eyes slitted till the pupils could scarcely be seen. Cliff addressed him directly: "Bein' that yuh're a outsider, I suggest that yuh fork yur hawse an' fan it fur home. Yuh might git yur tail in a crack if yuh browse aroun' this town, tonight."

"Maybe that's a good idea," Seal said, rising also. He threw a world of meaning into his voice as he looked steadily at the puncher and added: "I'll be back, though."

"Welcome to our city," Cliff told him, holding steady while Mayor Cook pinned a star to his suspender and stepped back and cocked his bald head to one side to view the artistic effect. "As marshal, I'll shore admire to see that yuh're looked after, plumb proper."

Seal turned to the mayor: "Fine work! Yuh wanta clean up th' town, an' yuh start in by appointin' a marshal that shot six men today, besides murderin' Lem Tucker."

"I don't believe I've shot 'nuff gazabos yet," Cliff told him. "An' I'm gonna start in fresh if I hear any more talk like that."

"Goodness, not here," the mayor trebled, his pink face whitening for once.

Seal spat disgustedly, with no regard for the rug, and stalked angrily out.

AFTER leaving the bank, Cliff went directly to the hardware store and bought a double-holstered belt and a six that was the mate of the one he had. Finding the action of the gun a little stiff, he took it to the shop in the rear and filed the dog so that it would shoot on a light trigger. Then he strapped his holsters down and strode through the muck, straight for the *Rustlers' Roost.*

The men in the room looked their surprise and milled uneasily at his approach, but he spoke to them crisply: "Yuh moochin' galoots git to hell outa here an' never let me see yuh again after sunrise t'morrow.

"Don't stand there gapin at me; c'mence travelin'!"

As they shambled out, grumbling beneath their breath, Blinky spoke ingratiatingly from behind the bar: "Bully work! I been wantin' to git rid of them booze lappin' leeches fur a long time."

But Cliff had turned to the delegation from the Badlands. "Yuh heared what I told them other snake-bellies. Well, it goes fur yuh lop-eared fence-creepers, too. Go-git yur hawses an' fan it. If yuh ever come back, hang yur belts on th' horn 'fore yuh leave saddle an' don't git rambunctious,

none whatever. Always leave town before sundown. That's orders."

The new marshal turned to the scowling Blinky. "Yuh gotta key to this place, I reckon — though it probably ain't been locked up for two-three years."

"Yeh, they's keys aroun' here somewheres; but—"

"Git 'em an' lock 'er."

Blinky thought he saw a ray of hope. "Oh, I see. On account of that up-scuffle today yuh think I better lock up until—"

"Until hell freezes over or yuh mend yur ways," Cliff broke in. "It's up to yuh. I'm here to demonstrate that I kin lock 'er, an' keep 'er locked. Later, if yuh talk just right, an' change yur sign so it reads, *'Turtledoves' Nest,'* I may let yuh open, an' keep open so long's yuh run a straight place."

The great scar on Blinky's coarse face loomed chalk-white against a flushed background. "But hell! I got my good money invested here an'—"

"Yeah, an' yuh got yur stealin's invested here, too. Lock 'er an' drift home. I don't wanta see yuh or any of yur bunch on th' streets after dark fur a week or two, anyways."

After the *Rustlers' Roost* had been closed and locked, Cliff visited the dance hall, forbidding it to open at nightfall, as usual; from there, he went to the poolhall and warned the proprietor not to allow it to be the loafing place of tinhorns, bums and moochers that it was and had been.

At sundown when the marshal strode into Bane's place, hung his hat on a peg and ordered supper, Bane waited on him, personally. "Seems like you made a pretty good start," he smiled, as he delivered the ham and eggs Cliff had ordered.

"It ain't a start, it's th' finish," Cliff assured him, cheerfully, as he commenced to attack the savory food.

"*My* finish, maybe," the marshal added beneath his breath after Bane had padded toward the rear room for his office.

CHAPTER VII

CLIFF'S BUSY NIGHT

At early sunset, the rain ceased, though another storm cloud hung in the northeast, muttering threateningly. For the double purpose of exercising the horse and looking the town over, Cliff saddled Red and rode him up one street and down another until he covered the entire southeastern district. Giving attention to the north side, he found a low stone jail across the alley from the rear of Bane's bar, it being the only building on that half-block. Finding the outside door unlocked, he went in, grinning as he inspected the place.

It was built almost exactly upon the plan of the jail at Tumbleweed, but evidently had not been occupied for months. The front room was in disorder. A near empty whiskey flask sat on the cluttered desk. A bunch of rusty keys hung on the wall, and, on a nearby nail, a jeans vest with a tarnished star pinned on it. The former marshal had left town in a hurry.

Cliff oiled the lock of the cell-room with kerosene from the smoky-globed bracket lamp and after sorting the keys, left, locking the outside door and leaving the cell key inside. In his mind, he promised to occupy the place, after giving it a good cleaning. After returning Red to the feedlot and caring for him, he went to Bane's for supper, then visited the hotel and engaged a room for the night. It was late dusk when he left the hotel with the intention of patroling the town until the last light was out in the business district. The landlord, a hollow chested old fellow who wore carpet slippers at least three sizes too large for him, called after him: "If yuh come in late, lock th' door after yuh. Yur room is th' first one on th' right at th' top of th' stairs. I'll leave a lamp burnin' on th' desk."

The town seemed quiet enough — *too* quiet, somehow—as Cliff turned eastward along the north side. A glance across at Blinky's place showed that it was dark.

A light glowed dimly in the office at the feedlot. All of the other buildings on that side were deserted, with the exception of the poolhall, which, upon coming opposite it, he saw was nearly empty. With the loafers and bandits driven off, the south and east sides were practically depopulated. Several dozen people were scattered along the walk on the north side—discussing the day's events, Cliff knew, for when he approached them they ceased talking until he had passed.

Shultz, the member of the city council, was locking his store. He waddled on up the walk and joined Doc, Mayor Cook and a few others who were having a social glass at Bane's bar. When Cliff passed, the mayor waved a fat hand in invitation, but just then Cliff's attention was attracted by a figure that came weaving toward him from the north. It was the cowboy he had seen thrown out of Blinky's place, and his gait and manner indicated that he was in fit condition to be thrown out of another one.

The marshal stepped to the right to avoid the wobbling man; the other veered in the same direction. Cliff reversed, slanting to the left; the other did likewise, and there was a slight collision.

Cliff started to push the other way, intending to advise him to bed down somewhere. He desisted when the cowboy leaned against him as though for support, and whispered cautiously: " 'Rest me, feller! I wanta talk to yuh, an' I don't want nobody to know it." He raised his voice for the benefit of anyone who might hear. "Git outa my way, yuh damn struttin' tin-star! What th' hell yuh bumpin' inta me fur?"

When Cliff hesitated, the cowboy settled the matter by knotting a fist and making a wild swing that knocked the marshal's hat off. Cliff caught the hat up with one hand, and grasped his first prisoner's collar with the other, twisting him around and shoving him toward the alley. As they went into the darkness he was aware that the men in Bane's place had come to the walk, knotting there with the others to watch curiously. Not wishing to be followed, Cliff called gruffly back to them, "Yuh birds go 'long an' tend to your own bizness. I ain't aimin' to have no mob congregatin' nowheres in town tonight."

When they entered the jail, Cliff lighted the wall lamp, locked the door, drew the two shades and looked his grinning "prisoner" over. He was young, withy, red-headed, his hands and face polka-dotted with enormous freckles. His mouth was large and had a humorous cast, despite the swollen lip that was one of the results of the battering he had received at Blinky's place. A big bump high on his forehead and a cut on his cheek were other evidences of Blinky's attention. "Talk," Cliff ordered laconically, seating himself on the pine desk and motioning the other to the only chair in the room.

THE prisoner talked, promptly and directly: "I hit this ornery burg this mornin' comin' from where I come from. I was watchin' my back-trail a little yet when I hit this dirty spot in th' road, ridin' through.

"Unnerstan' it was *my* hawse I was ridin', an' I hadn't plugged nobody in th' back or nothin' like that. They was a sheriff back home that I just nechurly couldn't git along with, so me an' him locked horns an' I—"

"Yuh're talkin' plumb outside my jurisdiction," Cliff told him. "I've signed up to rod this town, but I ain't overseein' th' United States of America.

"Yuh hit this town an' got sublimely pifflicated. Just start from there an' tell any stray facts that happent to register."

"I ain't been drunk none whatever," the prisoner declared, starting to lace up a cigaret, as Cliff was doing the same. "I took two drinks of bug poison in that skunkhouse over on th' south side. Somebody slipped somethin' inta th' booze, 'cause pritty soon my light went out. When I woke up, I was layin' on th' floor in th' back

room an' my money an' watch was gone. When I hollered, they ganged up an' beat th' hell outa me. I got out th' ol' hawgleg an' tried to hold up my end of th' argyment, but it was no go. They'd took th' shells outa th' gun an' them in my belt. I was just outa luck. They hazed me to th' door an'—"

Cliff rose, thinking the interview was over. "Yeh, I seen that part. I'll gun-whip Blinky or somethin', in th' mornin', an' see 'bout gittin' that watch an' dinero back."

"I'm indorsin' that program hearty," the other grinned, "but it ain't th' first order if bizness. Yuh see, it's this way: After them lop-ears worked me over, I crawled under th' postoffice an' recooperated till dark. Then I eased out an' went down th' alley an' snuck across to th' feedlot. Bein' broke an' not seein' any bright future fur me here, I was figgerin' on stealin' my hawse an' fannin' it fur parts unknown.

"I got my rig outa ol' Grimes' office awright, an' it was dark back 'mongst th' stalls, but just as I found Pete an' was about to throw th' leather on him, Ol' Grimes an' two other fellers come back there, kinda whisperin' 'mongst themselves. I dumped th' kak inta th' manger an' clumb in after it, an' listened to 'em.

"Makin' a short story shorter, yuh think yuh've run them dew-drinkers clean back to th' Badlands, but yuh ain't. Some boss feller follered 'em an' rounded 'em up, an' has got 'em staked out somewheres on th' aidge of town. He's gonna fetch 'em in, after a bit."

"Won't do 'em much good," Cliff said, confidently, "thy'll find th' south side locked tight."

"They ain't comin' after red-eye," the cowboy confided, "they're comin' after th' marshal's scalp. Here's th' way they fixed it:

"That stinkin' ol' billygoat of a Grimes is watchin' th' hotel. When yuh go in an' bed down, he puts out that lantern he's got lit in his winder. They got a geezer in th' weeds west of th' hotel, an' when that light goes out, he goes an' gits th' gang. Then th' gang comes an' gits th' marshal. Incidental, they got somethin' else on their minds but I can't figger out what it is.

"Anyway, yuh're their meat, unless we fool 'em, some way."

Cliff looked at the other keenly. "Yuh said *we*, cowboy. Mean it?"

"Yeh."

Cliff rose from the desk and clumped across to where the jeans vest hung. Unpinning the corroded star, he went back and fastened it to his erstwhile prisoner's shirt. "Stand up an' raise your right hand," he said, solemnly. "First, though, yuh gotta have a name. Think hard an' make a selection."

The grin on the cowboy's freckled face broadened. "Speck 'll do, I reckon."

"Awright, Speck, do yuh solemnly swear to support th' constitution of th' United States an' th' constitution of th' State of Nebraska an' shoot th' humped-up hell outa any onregenerate dew-drinker that gits snorky with yuh?"

"I do."

"Awright. I see yur gun's a 45; here's some shells for it an' some for yur belt. Yuh're deputy marshal of Black Rock an' may Gawd have mercy on yur soul.

"Better bed down here, tonight. I'll go fetch yuh some grub."

Cliff went to Bane's and got food and coffee which he carried to the jail, then turned to go out. "Where yuh goin'?" Speck asked.

"Over to th' hotel."

"But that gang is gonna—"

"Maybe they won't. Anyway, I'm gittin' sleepy unusually early. If they's gonna be a rukus, it may as well git started as soon's th' streets git clear."

Speck looked longingly at the food, sighed, and rose, tightening his belt. "Awright, I'm deputy, so—"

Cliff shook his head, grinning enigmatically. "Nope. Stay put, right here. We want them mangy coyotes to think I'm their

rabbit. I'll slosh aroun' town till Bane an' th' poolhall feller closes, an' things gits *quiet. Then we'll see what we see."*

WHEN Cliff reached the street, Bane's place was empty of patrons and the proprietor was checking his cash preparatory to closing. The streets were nearly empty now, and but a half-dozen die-hards were sticking it out in the poolhall. The reason was that the voice of the cloud mass in the northeast had changed from a low mutter to an ominous roar as it footed toward town, jagged lightning criss-crossing in its van. By the time Cliff had clumped down the north side and up the other as far as the poolhall, the customers there were departing hurriedly, and the owner had his key in the lock.

Cliff made another slow circuit, watching the shadowed vacant lots carefully and giving close attention to the spaces between buildings. Not for a moment had he entertained the idea that he had won more than a temporary success; in fact, despite the brave front he put up for the purpose of building up his prestige, he knew that his campaign to clean Black Rock had just begun, and that the chances were strongly against him. It was his will, his trigger fingers against the wills and trigger fingers of dozens of hardened men who looked upon Black Rock as their safe haven, not to be invaded by the alien hand of the law. To support him he had a tottering, timorous city government and a worried, harried slip of a girl.

Cliff thought of her, felt the warmth of her smile again, and threw his chest out. To fight her fight, he must first win his own. He'd give them a wrestle, win or lose.

The marshal made another trip along the north side, then circled to the narrow meandering alley and groped his way along it till he was at the rear of the feedlot. Entering by climbing the corral fence, he tramped silently across the muck of the main enclosure and reached the office door.

Old Grimes was lying on his musty bunk by the window, gazing across at the unlighted front of the hotel. He raised to one hip and elbow and turned toward the door when Cliff said from the threshold: "No use to watch over there, I'm here."

Grimes grinned toothlessly through his tangle of stained beard, then scowled at what he evidently saw in the marshal's face. "Whatchu want?" he asked, sourly.

"You," Cliff told him, succintly. "Git up an' cinch on some clothes."

"I ain't gonna do it," the old reprobate blustered. "I gotta brother that's a Justice of th' Peace down in Kansas, an' I've learnt some law. I'm th' boss here, an' I ain't sent fur no officer."

"That's where I'm particularly accommodatin'." Cliff told him. "I don't wait to be sent for. Git inta them britches."

"I hain't gonna do it."

"Awright. Come along without 'em then." Cliff caught a double handful of beard and hauled relentlessly. Seeing that the marshal was in earnest, Grimes ceased bluffing and commenced whining. "I've changed my mind. I'll put them pants on."

"I've changed mine, too. Yuh're goin' just as yuh are. Git started."

Taking the prisoner out the rear way, Cliff circled the business section and followed the other alley to the jail, where he found Speck playing solitaire on the desk. "What yuh doin' with Methusyler?" he asked, when he saw Grimes blinking and scowling in the lamp light.

"Gonna christianize him some," Cliff said. "Chuck him back in th' cell an' bend yur gun barrel over his head if he gits noisy."

"Yuh can't do this to me," Grimes protested. "I gotta right to know what I'm charged with."

Speck looked worried. "Oh, that-a-way, eh?" He got a dog-eared book from a desk drawer, produced a stub pencil and seated himself at the desk with great formality.

"First, fur our own protection, I'm gonna make a note that at th' time of his detention

an' incarceration th' said prizner ain't got no pants on, an' his underwear is tored scandelous, at a certain spot—towitt, th' seat. When we release him, if we ever do, he'll prob'ly claim he was wearin' a dress suit an' a opery coat.

"Now, Mister officer, what's the prizner charged with?"

"Spittin' on th' ground. Sleepin' with his eyes shut. Breathin' air. Wearin' hair. Drinkin' water."

Speck shook his red head disapprovingly. "I'm 'fraid yuh're kinda reckless with yur charges, officer. I don't b'lieve yuh could substanshinate that there last one to th' satisfaction of any intellygent jury. Them other charges is 'nuff to hold him, though.

"Haze yurself inta that stall yuh dawg-goned ol' gingwallipus or I'll git me a bed-slat an' learn yur more law than ten judges can find in th' books."

Again taking to the alleys, Cliff went back to the feedlot. Being careful not to show himself at the window, he put the light out, then seated himself on the bunk and waited.

For a time, nothing happened. Added to the growing growl of the oncoming storm were the usual night sounds—the whining plea for oil of the windmill above the overhead tank that furnished water for the business section; the insistent bawling of a mother cow which had been deprived of her new born offspring; the shrill yapping of cur dogs and the eerie screech of the wind-swayed board sign swung across the walk in front of the cafe. Cliff had lighted his third cigaret from the stub of its predecessor. He dropped it to the floor and ground the fire from it with his boot sole, and rose, listening alertly.

A NEW note had crept into the voice of the night—a subdued slithering sound that plainsmen recognize as the walking of many horses through tall grass. Then hooves splashed through puddles as they entered the road. When they plop-plopped nearer, the low jingle of spurs and creak of wet leather aided Cliff in marking their progress.

Then his eyes took up the work his ears had been doing faultily. He saw a compact mass of horsemen flow into the semicircle of pale light before the old hotel, almost directly across the point of the triangle from him. He counted them, mechanically, and saw that there were ten riders. He was not a little surprised when, after four had dismounted before the hotel, the others turned down the side street and disappeared toward the back of the place. The marshal heard no order spoken, but each man seemed to know exactly what he was to do.

Two of the four stationed themselves one on each side of the front door and close up against the building. The other two dropped into the slime of the gutter at the edge of the sidewalk. When a bright zig-zag of lightning lighted the path of the advancing storm, Cliff could see the gleam of the rifle barrels they had rested across their laps.

Cliff decided that those hunting him had split—one group to go to the rear and ascend by an outside stairway there and drive him out, the others to blast him into eternity when he showed on the walk. He knew that if that was true they would seek him elsewhere upon discovering that they had been misled, and that a clash would be inevitable unless he skulked away, turning the town over to them.

Cliff wouldn't do the latter. He would fight, but he would do it when he had the initiative, and when he was on ground of his own choosing. His cue was to wait them out.

Seconds built minutes and the lagging minutes built an hour. Still the skulkers across the way maintained their vigil, moving seldom and speaking not at all. Even when the advancing storm set the street a-splash with wind-driven rain, the men in the gutter stoically held their positions, merely buttoning their slickers and turning their backs to the howling blast.

For some time Cliff had been chafing.

Frayed by practically three days of almost continuous strain, his nerves were twitching for a show-down, even as his tired body pleaded insistently for relaxation in sleep. He had ceased to think he knew what those furtive fellows over there had in mind, but he did know that the situation had become intolerable. Removing his spurs so that their tinkling would not betray him, he went out by the back way and circled the hotel, bent upon locating the fellows he had seen ride back there.

Another surprise was in store for the marshal. The alley was pitch dark, but he groped and squddled his way over every square foot of it from the side street on up as far as Bane's place. Not a horse nor a man was there.

Cliff stood in the drenching rain and thought it over, finally concluding that the bandits hadn't entered the alley at all, as he had assumed they had. Why they had done so, he was unable to guess, but his final conclusion was that they had brought the four men in to lie in wait for him, then taken their horses and departed, probably leaving the horses somewhere in the outskirts of town where the owners could get them, after their job was finished. It wasn't exactly a satisfactory explanation, but it was the best the tired, brain-fagged marshal could evolve. Also, it simplified things for him.

They were around there in front waiting for him. Why they expected him to come out didn't matter. They did, and they were there. Cliff smiled in the darkness as he remembered one of his favorite boyhood pranks—the game where the gang coaxed a greeny to go snipe hunting, at night, then sneaked home and left him holding the bag.

Bully idea! He plodded through the muck of the vacant lots, located the jail and entered when he found the door unlocked. He found Speck lying on one of the musty smelling bunks. He was in his wet clothes and there was excitement and a bit of bewilderment in his voice as he rose. "Glad to meet yuh, Boss," he admitted, grinning whimsically. "They's spooks aroun' here, an' I wantchu to help me round 'em up."

Cliff mustered a sleepy grin as he sat down on the desk and started to haul off a soggy boot. "Spooks, eh?"

"Yeh. Damndest thing I ever heard of." He held up a hand. "Listen! Hear anything?"

"Nope—nothin' but a rip-roarin' ol' rainstorm." Cliff started to pull at the boot again. "That dope musta left yuh kinda jumpy."

"Come over here an' set." Speck had placed a chair against the wall by the east window and he motioned his superior to it. "Now lean yur head back 'ginst th' wall."

To humor him, Cliff complied. "What kinda noise am I to listen for?"

"Clinkin' sound, like somebody chiselin' or drillin'," Speck declared. "I was leanin' 'ginst that same place on th' wall when I heard it an' thought somebody was tryin' to cut their way in here an' help ol' Grimes break fence on me. When I got up I couldn't hear nothin' an' when I set down I heared it again, an—"

THIS time it was Cliff who held up a hand for silence. Surprisingly, he had heard a succession of metalic sounds so low as to be barely heard, yet clear and distinct. Sure enough, it was downright "spooky," as Speck had said.

"No use," the deputy declared when Cliff rose, half drew a gun and started for the door. "I liketa drownded myself cat-footin' aroun' out there without findin' a human. Furdermore, th' noise ain't there when I'm on th' outside, but I hear it ev'ry time I put my ear on th' wall there by th' waterpipe."

"Waterpipe?" Cliff whirled back, struck by a tremendous possibility.

"Yeh, waterpipe. They's one in th' wall above that shelf there, but it ain't got no faucet on it. Seems like it—

"Hey! Where yuh hittin' for?"

Cliff was on his feet again, seemingly as

though jarred from his chair by a slow rumbling explosion that shook the little town. Five minutes before, he might have confused it with the sharper, clearer blasts of thunder, but not now. As he plunged for the door, his active mind was arraying a jumble of facts that had been overlooked during the excitement of the day.

Those tools that had dropped from the little black satchel carried by the youth in the blue serge suit were burgler's tools, and the youth was a professional yeggman—probably a city fugitive who had sought refuge in the Badlands.

Blinky Morgan had been called down by Seal for mentioning a "big deal on for tonight." Speck had heard Grimes and the others talking about doing something other than assaulting the marshal. The big possibility had become a strong probability. Those watchers down by the hotel had been posted to cut the marshal down if the noise of that explosion brought him out. The other bandits *had* ridden into the alley, then up it to the bank. The sounds of their drilling and chiseling had carried along the underground waterpipe from the vault to the jail.

"What's up?" Speck bawled, as Cliff plunged outside and stumbled toward the alley.

"They're robbin' th' bank," Cliff called back, lowering his voice discreetly. "Git yur gun an' come on, but come with yur mouth shut an' yur eyes open! We gotta sneak up on 'em."

"Better wait for me," Speck suggested, but Cliff tramped on, slowing his pace cautiously after he passed Bane's place. At the rear of Doc's store, he stopped to listen.

At first, nothing was to be heard but the drum of rain on the tin roof and the gurgle and splash of water discharged down the overcharged eave drains.

Then, in the darkness ahead, a tin can rattled lightly and bootheels ground on cinders or gravel. Apparently a little farther on, the hooves of a horse made sucking sounds in the mud, and a mumble of voices sounded.

The big probability had become a certainty, now.

FUMBLING under his slicker, Cliff drew a gun and wallowed forward till his free hand located the corner of the bank building. Working along the wet wall, he came to a window and stopped to peer in.

Up front was a dim light, reflected from somewhere about the front of the vault. As he left the window and groped his way on, running footsteps sounded inside and a suppressed voice chortled just inside the door: "Well, boys, we got 'er."

"Fetch 'er on out," an authoritative voice sounded from the other corner of the building. "Hustle, now! That explosion's gonna bring th' hull damn town out!"

More running footsteps. From the sounds they made jumping from the doorstep into the mud, Cliff counted three of them. A fourth cursed luridly when he collided with some article of furniture inside and fell to the floor with a crash.

The voice of the leader came again, a little impatiently: "Yuh there, Sam?"

"He's comin' with th' swag — got it sacked," another voice answered, just as Cliff's clawing fingers located the doorcasing. He had just taken another step to bar the opening when the man who had fallen inside came cursing over the threshold and rammed against him, breast on.

The marshal caught an arm, found that it was hugging a canvas sack and wrenched at it with all his might, at the same time swinging his pistol at the spot where he guessed the bandit's head was.

The sack came free, and Cliff tucked it under his own arm as the limp body of the bandit slumped against him. Backing free of it, he heard it chug into the mud at his feet.

The alley was boiling with action now. Horses were milling and the jerky creak of leather announced that saddles were taking the weight of the riders. The leader's voice

sounded close by the door, now: "Why in hell don't Sam come on?"

"He's out," another voice answered. Locating the leader, an ebon splotch in the grey-black darkness by the door, Cliff swung the six again, almost falling when the other moved away, and his blow fell short. Recovering his balance, he was about to open fire, when the rear wall of the bank appeared to sway down and land with crushing force on his skull, and the pool of water at his feet seemed devilishly bent on tiding up and covering him.

Swaying in that dim unmarked zone between consciousness and oblivion, Cliff knew that the force of the blow had spun him half around; that the sack and gun had fallen from his relaxed hands; that his back was against the dripping wall of the bank and that he was sliding slowly to his haunches.

Into his hazy consciousness drifted a medley of confused sounds: "Git goin', dammit . . . This ain't my hawse! . . . To hell with whose hawse it is—git on him! . . . Somebody's comin'! . . . Let 'em ramble!"

A shot, then another, ripped the darkness close to Cliff's face. On his haunches now, he strove weakly to draw his other gun, losing his balance and falling to his side in the effort.

More shots close by and a fusillade of hissing lead in answer. The milling horses broke into flight, spattering up the side street and turning west along the north side of the triangle. At the corner of the building a succession of flashes showed that someone was shooting at the receding band.

Rallying by a supreme effort, Cliff fumbled his second gun free of the holster as he weaved westward to Doc's lot, then south along the west side of the drugstore.

Up front a shotgun blared twice, then twice more, after an interval. A light was burning in the front window of the drugstore, and Doc was on the walk in his nightshirt. When Cliff appeared, he turned the shotgun on him and cursed shortly when the hammer clicked harmlessly. At the same moment, a lone rider spattered by in the wake of the others. Doc jammed shells into the empty gun and fired one shot at the retreating figure, then whirled on Cliff: "Stick 'em up!"

"It's me—Rudd," Cliff told him and started to go to him.

But, as the puddle back in the alley had done, the plank walk seemed to undulate beneath his mincing feet, one wave of it boiling up and striking him on the chin.

A flash of pain caromed from one side of his skull to the other and brilliant lights flashed before his eyes, dimming gradually as a great peace slowly enveloped him. As a babe sleeps, so he slept, half roused for a few seconds, vaguely aware of being carried somewhere, then slept again with Black Rock and trouble afar.

Once, he came reluctantly half way back from his dream world to the rougher, noiser one to which he had been accustomed. He was on a bed and lazily spinning figures were about him; occasionally one stopped and steadied till he could get a look at it. Doc was there, his honest face anxious and strained. Later, Cliff laughed aloud when he saw Mayor Cook, a chuffy, grotesque figure with his nightshirt half in and half out of his trousers and his suspenders dangling. He held a shotgun wrong end up and his round face was pale and twitching. Cliff caught a fleeting glimpse of Bane, also carrying a shotgun, and Shultz, puffing in, wiping his rain-beaded face and sputtering incoherent inquiries.

As Cliff was about to decide that these hazy figures were real, they slipped away again, and Dreamland caught him up.

It was a nice, bright little world that the marshal saw; and in it was but one person other than himself—a starry-eyed girl with deep blue eyes, sun-tinted amber hair and a radiant smile that made full recompense for all his worrying, struggling and suffering.

But one thing bothered him now. When he tried to rise and go to where the girl

stood smiling at him, some fool—at times, two or three of them—caught him and held him down, despite his struggling and cursing.

Damn 'em, he'd show them he could—

Something pricked his arm and his lagging nerves telegraphed a light sensation of pain to his tired brain.

Then sleep again—this time deep and unbroken. He no longer fought to go to the girl; she had come to him, now, and everything was all right.

CHAPTER VIII
VISITORS

CLIFF RUDD awoke by slow stages to find Doc Livingston bending over him, holding a hand on his pulse and peering down at him through his thick-lensed glasses. "Well, how are you feeling this morning?" the little surgeon asked, cheerfully.

Cliff smiled weakly. "Fine, now that I've decided yuh're real." He looked at the snowy cot he was on, then out through the window by which it stood, and he knew that he was in Doc's front room, and that it really was morning, because the sunlight was bathing the boardwalks, where it seemed half the town had congregated, to discuss the robbery and the marshal's injury.

"Hungry?" Doc asked, experimentally, still holding the pulse and watching his patient closely through the thick lenses.

"Not particular," Cliff told him. "Little coffee might do; I'm feelin' kinda shaky."

Doc released the pulse and nodded understandingly. "Shouldn't wonder. You've been through enough to tear the nerves right out of an ordinary man."

"That's it," Cliff said, commencing to fidget under the sheet. "I can't quite make out just what I have been through. What I mean is that some of the things I thought happent did, an' some of 'em—"

"Hold up," Doc ordered. "Just lie there and take it easy and don't try to solve any puzzles."

"But I wanta know—"

"All right, then, if you're bound to fret, perhaps I'd better straighten you out the best I can. Suppose you tell me what you know; perhaps I can fill in the rest."

Cliff related his attempt to stop the robbers, how he got the moneybag and lost it, and what he had seen and heard when half-dazed. "What I can't get, though, is who banged me on th' skull out there on th' sidewalk?"

"Nobody. You had been under a heavy strain for days and that blow you got back in the alley upset you further, though it didn't knock you out completely. You simply collapsed on the walk and we carried you in here." Doc's shrewd old eyes danced behind the thick lenses. "I must say your muscular organization still was in working order. It took four of us to hold you in bed when you got delirious and wanted to go to that imaginary girl of yours. If I hadn't given you a hypodermic, I believe you'd have licked all of us, weakened as you were."

Somebody rapped on the door and when Doc opened it, Mayor Cook came in, looking wan but, in a way, cheerful, as he approached the cot, after Doc had nodded permission. "How much did yuh lose?" Cliff asked, nervously.

"Only about ten thousand. You mustn't worry about it. It would have been much worse if they had gotten into the other safe—which they might have done if you hadn't showed up."

Ordering Cliff to keep still, Doc told what Cliff had related. When he had finished, the mayor looked thoughtful for a time, then asked, "Don't like to pester you with questions, but I want to ask just one: Did you recognize any of the bandits or get a clue that's of any value?"

Cliff thought it over. He *thought* he knew one of them; but, after all, it was mere supposition—just a hunch. He was

shaking his head in negative when a horse slid to a stop out front and its rider leaped to the walk and came running. It was Speck who came in. His clothing, hands, face and hair were coated with drying mud, but he grinned expansively when Cliff rose to one elbow despite Doc's warning frown. Cliff pointed through the window at the horse that stood panting at the edge of the walk. "Where'd yuh git that blaze-faced dun cayuse?"

"Back in th' alley, las' night."

Cliff fairly yelled the next statement and question. "His face is so damn muddy I ain't sure, but I think I know him. Has he gotta star an' a diamond?"

"Uh-huh."

"Seal's horse," Mayor Cook said wonderingly. "How in the world did—"

"Let Speck talk," Cliff suggested, smiling dryly. "Yuh fellers don't know it, but he's a deputy marshal of this town—was last night, anyway.

"Go 'head, Speck. Commence at th' commencement an' don't stop till yuh've emptied yur think tank."

Speck sat down on the edge of the cot and started to build a smoke with fingers that were a bit shaky. "When yuh left th' jail, I loped after yuh but couldn't locate yuh, so when I got to th' bank I didn't know whether I was ahead of yuh or behind yuh—don't know yet, for that matter.

"Anyway, when things got to boilin', an' I knowed that bunch of lop-ears was about to make their git-away, I heared one of 'em say that another 'un was comin' from th' bank with th' dinero, so I nosed my way to th' door an' located th' jasper with th' sack an' give him th' butt back of his ear."

Cliff came up to one elbow again. "Th' hell yuh did! Damn yur toad-specked ol' hide, that was *me* yuh slugged."

Speck expelled his breath with a whistling sound. "Whew-ee! Some deputy, ain't I? First thing I do—"

"Wait a second," the mayor cut in, commencing to get excited. "If the others were gone, or going, when you slugged Rudd, what became of that bag of money he dropped?"

Speck scratched his disheveled red head uncertainly. "Les-see. That sack did fall 'ginst my laig, but bizness was so rushin' just then that I didn't stop to pick it up or—

"Keno! I remember, now! I kicked it under th' buildin'!"

"Wha-a-t?" the mayor gasped, springing up from the rocker in which he had just seated himself. "You mean that money is—"

He broke off abruptly and started for the door at a hitching lope, but he stopped and stood walking up and down in one place when Cliff barked at him:

"Wait a secont. My thinker's clickin', now, so I want yuh to lissen clost. Have yuh told anybody how much dinero them geezers eloped with?"

"Certainly. I must be honest with the stockholders and with the public, when a loss is sustained."

"Yeh, but yuh don't hafta tell all yuh know if they ain't no loss. Slip back there quietlike an' peek aroun'. If yuh locate that sack of dough, chuck it back in yuh bank, but don't say nothin' to nobody but us three."

"But I don't see why—"

"I do, an' yuh will later on, if th' mazuma is there. Go see 'bout it."

THE mayor ambled out as fast as his short legs would carry him. Within a few minutes he was back, rubbing his chuffy palms together in high glee, his round pink face wreathed in smiles. "Found it, and slipped it in through the back door. Nobody but Heath, my cashier, knows or will know till you say so. Though I can't see what good it will do to—"

"I do," Speck grinned. "Cliff figgers that if things stands as is, an' everybody thinks them galoots has got th' bank's cash, said galoots 'll git to lookin' splay-eyed at each other, an' sooner or later they'll git inta a

rukus — smoke-talk, maybe. That right, Mister Marshal?"

"K'rect, Mister Deputy! Go to th' head of th' class. Everybody an' everything was in a jumble, just then, but near's I can figger it, th' boss man was huntin' fur th' feller with th' sack when I downed him. After that, nobody knowed what had become of th' cash, but they thought some one of 'em had it, or they wouldn't have rid off an' left it.

"Let 'em think that. Sooner or quicker some of 'em's gonna lock horns over it. They's a ol' sayin' that when thieves falls out honest men gits their whack at th' pot.

"Now go 'head, Speck. Yuh knocked my head loose on my neck, an' kicked that sack. What next?"

"Well, they was millin' like a bunch of mired steers an' had got their hawses mixed some."

"One of 'em was down, so they had a extry hawse," Cliff explained. "I knocked out th' geezer with th' sack an' he musta follered th' bunch afoot."

"Anyway," Speck went on, "I was follerin' 'em on foot squirtin' lead promiscuous, when I ran slap-dab 'ginst that hawse out there. I cut up on him an' took after 'em. After leavin' town over west there they scattered, an' that dun hawse I was forkin' kept after one of 'em gainin' gradual till a little before daylight this mornin'. I'm tellin' yuh that hawse is some stayer."

"Like th' feller that was straddlin' him," Cliff commented, admiringly. "Did yuh git th' geezer?"

"Yeh. He kep' to th' prairy till it begun to git light. As he was hittin' for th' Badlands th' dun run him down an' we made smoke."

"Talk any, did he?"

"Nope—he couldn't."

Cliff started to ask another question, but Doc forbade him to talk more until he had eaten or at least had coffee.

"Speakin' of coffee," Speck said, wistfully. "Yur deputy-marshal ain't been dinin' on th' fat of th' land since he took office."

"My-my!" the mayor ejaculated, springing up. "I'll take pleasure in having Bane serve breakfast for you here." He clapped Speck heartily on the shoulder, then wrung Cliff's hand. "There'll be a—er—slight evidence of appreciation from the bank to both of you—ah—officers.

"By the way, Mister—er—"

"Speck," Cliff supplied, smiling.

"Very well, Mister—ah—Speck. It appears that you already have been commissioned as a deputy. I'm quite sure the members of the council will approve that appointment and adjust the salary to your satisfaction."

"Never mind th' salary, right now," Speck pleaded, earnestly. "Lead me to that chuck or have it brung here, while I go put that hawse up. He's earnt a feed, too."

The mayor waddled out to bring breakfast for three, Doc having declared himself in on it. Speck took the dun to the feedlot and had just returned when Bane and the mayor brought in the steaming trays of ham and eggs and a pot of coffee.

Cliff wanted to get up, but Doc forbade it, bracing him up on pillows so he could eat in bed. They had just started eating when a visitor shouldered his way through the chattering throng of curious-minded men and women on the walk, and entered without ceremony. It was Bill Seal, mud plastered from hard riding and he seemed much excited. "Lookin' fur yuh, Rudd," he said as he stood by the bed, drawing off his spattered gauntlets. "Somebody stole my dun hawse, from th' corral, last night. I sent word to Hawkface Gibbons, this mornin', an' hustled right over here to tell yuh, personal."

"I feel highly complimented," Cliff drawled, watching the rancher's furrowed face through narrowed lids. "Hawkface bein' a sheriff, an' me only a cheap town marshal, looks like yuh'd a gone to see *him* an' sent word to *me*—more especial as he's

officer in yur county an' I ain't."

Seal slitted his own pale eyes and fingered his bulldog chin. "Dunno just why I come here 'stead of goin' t'other way. Maybe it's because they's so many bad hombres in this neighborhood — I thought it was th' likeliest place to look."

"Well, anyway, yuh come to th' right place. Yur hawse is down to th' feedlot. My deputy picked him up back of th' bank just after th' rob'ry."

Seal's eyes opened wide. "Robbery?" Huh! I was wonderin' what all th' excitement was about. They told me out there that yuh was hurt an' was in here. Shot, are yuh?"

"Nope—just banged on th' head. It don't 'mount to shucks. All I'm sorry fur is that I let them skunks elope with th' bank's dinero!"

For the barest fraction of a second a startled look appeared in the pale eyes and the thick lips quivered slightly. He turned to the mayor: "How much did yuh lose?"

"They took ten thousand," the mayor told him, truthfully enough.

"Feller they called Sam toted it out an' handed it over to some other geezer," Cliff said, casually, still watching Seal's face.

The heavy countenance contorted into a scowl and dull red crept from neck to brow while the pale eyes glittered malevolently. Then a look of sly cunning succeeded the black scowl and he leered down at Cliff and sneered, "Are yuh plumb shore yuh don't know who got holt of that cash?"

Speck, who had been eating busily, threw down his knife and fork so forcibly that the saucer was broken. He rose, glaring at Seal whose thick lips retained their cynical, insinuating smile.

The implication was so plain that Cliff felt his blood boil. He had a hot reply ready on his lips and was squirming to get from under the sheet when Doc snarled at him: "Lie down there, and be quiet or I'll give you a shot of dope that 'll put you to sleep for six months.

"The rest of you gabbling numbskulls get to hell out of here and stay out until you know enough not to start an argument with a man that's just been in a state of nervous exhaustion.

"While you're on your way to the door, Seal, I'll assure you that Rudd didn't git that money. He has been under my eye since a few seconds after the sack left the bank, so—

"*Now* what the hell's up?"

IN the haste of his entrance, Seal had left the door slightly ajar. It swung wider and through it came Hawkface Gibbons, and, at his heels, little Brainard, natty in new white flannels, and bubbling over with friendliness as he crowded past the sheriff and extended a hand to Cliff. The marshal had had many startling things happen to him of late, but perhaps the greatest surprise of all was when Hawkface extended a hand also, and said, awkwardly, "Damn sorry yuh got hurt. If they's anything I kin do, say it.

"Us officers hasta stick up fur each other, yuh know," he said, half apologetically, as he noted that the others, like Cliff, were staring at him, wonderingly.

Doc took charge again. "Glad to see you, Gibbons—your friend, also. But, if there's anything of an unpleasant nature you have to discuss with Rudd, I must forbid it."

Hawkface waved a sun-cooked hand reassuringly. "Nothin' snorky about what I gotta say. Nothin' private about part of it, neither. Fact is I reckon I'm due to come clean with Rudd, an' with th' public.

"I 'rested him fur dry-gulchin' Lem Tucker. Well, folks, he never done it."

"How do yuh know he never," Seal asked, bluntly.

"How I know is nobody's damn bizness but mine," Hawkface said, his voice sharpening a little. "I know what I know, an' that's 'nuff fur anybody else but Rudd.

"First, though, I'm puttin' it out public

that they ain't gonna be no more necktie parties in Tumbleweed 'cept on order of a court an' jury. I come damn near stringin' up th' wrong man in this case. I ain't gonna do no sich, no more."

"Gittin' soft, are yuh?" Seal sneered, disgustedly.

"Try me an' see," Hawkface bristled. "What I said about this case goes; what else I gotta say, I'll say to Rudd."

Taking the rather broad hint, the others filed out—excepting Speck, who remained at Cliff's request. The little sheriff came straight to the point:

"Brainard here's a scientific little cuss. 'Mongst other things he's a ballistics expert—meanin' that he kin take a bullet an' a microscope an' some other tools an' tell whose gun a bullet didn't come out of.

"Well, he went an' dug out a bullet he's fired inta a oak stump from that gun he traded to yuh. Then he got th' bullet outa Lem Tucker's skull. When he showed 'em to me an' explained th' process, I knowed I'd 'cused yuh wrong."

"I knowed that all along," Cliff told him, dryly. "Next thing is who *did* kill him? That microscope help any, Brainard?"

"Yes, if we spot the right man and get a chance to try his gun. You see first—"

"We'll take your word for that part," the sheriff interposed, hastily. "Yuh orated fur two hours when I ast yuh that, las' night. I don't wanta git yuh started all over again." He turned to Cliff: "If we knowed th' man an' could git bullets from his gun—"

"I know him," Cliff said quietly. He thought for a little time, with the others staring questioningly at him. When the little sheriff stumped out an hour later, with Brainard at his heels like a well-trained dog, he stopped on the walk to call for attention and deliver what probably was the longest speech of his busy life: "Folks," he said, "as a representative of Tumbleweed county, I'm invitin' yuh to a wild bronc ridin' an' shootin' at Tumbleweed, a week from this comin' Saturday.

"Furdermore, I'm explainin' that we gotta armistice. Th' wild bunch is invited special, an' no questions ast, so long's they behave themselves proper and leave town afore night. It'll be a nice quiet affair with no damn profanity allowed; so, I hope ev'ry damn one of you good ladies comes. I know all hell couldn't keep th' menfolks away."

AS the sheriff was finishing his oration, Brainard, who had gone out with him, slipped back and smilingly handed Cliff a note. After the little scientist had left him alone, he ripped the envelope and scowled jealously as he read the first line: "Mr. Seal has told me that you are Marshal at Black Rock."

The scowl changed to a broad grin of delight as he read the remaining lines:

I wish you to know that I am delighted upon learning that you have been completely exonerated with regard to my father's death. I trust you, and hope you will succeed in running down the real murderer.

I hope to see you some time soon.

Lucile Tucker.

When Speck came in, a few minutes later, he gulped in surprise when Cliff rose to a sitting posture and opened his arms wide: "Come an' kiss me, Sweetheart! Yuh'll just hafta do it, or I'll hafta kiss myself!"

Coming in just then, Doc shook his head and went to the tool cabinet for his hypodermic. "Don't bother to dope me none," Cliff told him, leaning back on his pillow and closing his eyes. "I feel all set for a good sleep an' happy dreams."

"But what I wanta know is what are we gonna do with that gopher-eyed ol' devil of a Grimes," Speck said, disregarding the fact that Doc was motioning him toward the door.

"Feed him kinda scant an' question him a lot," Cliff answered, promptly. "Don't let nobody else talk to him under no circumstances."

"Got yur orders," Speck assured him as he started out. "I'll give him a short feed an' let his conscience go to workin' on him. After I've had a nap, I'll go on duty tonight, visitin' th' jail to wake him up ev'ry time I make th' rounds. That'll keep him from forgittin' his sins, or—"

"Git out," Doc rumbled, picking up a sprayer marked BUG POISON and aiming it at the grinning deputy.

Speck got.

CHAPTER IX
LOVE AND WAR

FOR three long days Cliff policed Black Rock effectively from the cot by the front window of Doc's little white cottage. Speck was invaluable, patroling for sixteen hours of each twenty-four, including the all-night watch. Rigidly he enforced Cliff's order that all business establishments must be closed by nine, with no loafing or loitering allowed anywhere about the triangle. To that, Speck added a forceful little statement of his own to the effect that in case he saw anything move in the dark, he'd shoot at it, "some prompt an' plumb tenacious."

The co-operation of the mayor and councilmen was sincere and enthusiastic. Every merchant on the north side was commissioned as a special officer, and double-barreled shotguns loaded with buckshot leaned against the walls of their places of business by daylight, accompanying them to their homes by night. Stirred by the supposed robbery of the bank, in which many of the citizens were stockholders, timid ones who formerly had been neutral through fear or indifference, lined up with the new marshal. The law had come to Black Rock while he was active; they would keep it there till he regained his feet.

Despite Speck's almost ceaseless questioning, old Grimes maintained his sullen silence, often flaring to hot anger at the manner in which he was being "persecuted." Following Cliff's instructions, Speck did not tell the old reprobate how the officers knew that he was involved in the plot to kill Cliff; instead, he was given the impression that some member of the gang had "leaked." On the third day, following a well defined plan, Cliff instructed Speck not to quiz the prisoner any more, but to keep away from him entirely except when carrying him his meals, and to refuse to talk to him about the gang, even if he showed a disposition to converse on that subject.

"Whisper to yurself if yuh wanta talk," Speck told Grimes as he relocked the cell door after depositing a fair meal on the floor. "Anything a lop-eared, leaky-eyed, gopher-voiced ol' herd breaker like yuh sez ain't fit fur no white man's ears. Havin' to know that me an' yuh lives in th' same state makes me sick at my stummick besides inducin' a pain in my neck."

The prisoner's bluster was gone now. He looked appealingly out through the crossed bars and whined, "Looks like yuh might treat me as if I was human."

"What in hell would we wanta do that fur?" Speck asked, after looking Grimes up and down judgmatically.

ON the afternoon of the third day, Doc redressed the wounds on Cliff's shoulder and arm, and admitted that they were beyond danger of infection. The abrasion on his scalp was so slight that it already was healed. "You're practically sound, son," the old physician said with gruff kindliness, "so I'm letting you out on your promise to take things easy for a few days. No long hours on watch; no excitement of any kind that can be avoided. Remember, you've had a fever, and you're still on the edge of it."

"Hand me them pants," Cliff requested, delightedly, throwing his feet to the floor. "First thing I'm gonna do is to fork Red an' take a little ride. Me an' him both needs some exercise."

Doc could not possibly have indorsed the "little ride" that Cliff took. After walking Red around the triangle once, he commenced edging him eastward, finally taking to a wagon trail that he knew could lead nowhere but to the Tucker ranch. Somehow Red's walk speeded up to a jog, then to a canter; after a few miles he was swinging along at the open gallop that was good for twenty miles an hour. Cliff knew that he ought to be back in town regaining his grip on things. He knew that he was violating Doc's orders and risking his own physical welfare. He laid it all off onto the horse. "Ramble along if yuh're so goll-durn oaty," he said, as they left the plain to breast the first rolling hill beyond. "Doc says I mustn't strain myself, so I ain't gonna put in th' afternoon haulin' back on these reins an' tirin' myself plumb out."

It was past three o'clock when Cliff reined in by a vine canopied porch fronting a big wide-eaved ranch-house, back-grounded by a neat array of outbuildings and corrals. Ground-hitching Red, he turned to the porch, stopping with one foot on the lower step to gape speechlessly at the vision in ruffled blue gingham that had appeared in the doorway to smile down at him. "How do you do?" she fluted, smiling so alluringly that Cliff swallowed his Adam's apple and retrieved it by running a finger around the collar of his flannel shirt.

" 'Lo," he gulped. "I'm pritty well, thank you. Just takin' a little ride to kinda toughen up, an' first thing I knowed we was way out here."

The smile that followed made him a little dizzy. "But, aren't you coming in? You're not looking any too strong and should rest a while before starting back."

For some reason, Cliff wasn't feeling any too strong, either. But he made it up the steps and followed her into a big, airy livingroom with a wide fireplace and heavy walnut furniture that would have driven an antique dealer wild with envy. He trembled all over when her fingers touched his as she took his hat. He shook as if with ague when she passed close to him to hang the hat on an antler rack on the wall back of him. His feet seemed to occupy half the floor space in the room, and he couldn't figure out what to do with his hands. In other words, he was a normal young fellow who was calling on a girl for the first time in his life.

Being a normal young girl who was being called on for the first time in her life, Lucile Tucker still possessed sufficient poise and tact to gradually put him at his ease by talking about the rains and the prospects for fall pasture. "Not that it will make any great difference in my case," she admitted, smiling ruefully. "I'm about out of cattle."

"Rustlers been nickin' yuh again?" Cliff asked, with quick interest.

"I'm afraid they have—and in a wholesale way, at that. You see, we've had so many men injured and killed by dry-gulchers that I haven't had the heart to take on new hands; so I've been unable to even keep track of our losses. The best check that we've been able to make lately shows that we have less than fifteen hundred head left out of more than five thousand." She spread her white hands in a gesture of surrender. "Just forget about my troubles. I'm simply licked as a cattle rancher.

"I still have a good horse herd—that is about all."

"Fifteen hundred head is some cattle, an' yuh own yur own grass," Cliff consoled, awkwardly.

"Fifteen hundred would do for stock purposes if I could keep them, but I know I can't. I'm just licked."

The amber head dropped a little and her lids winked rapidly, fighting the moisture that was glistening in the deep blue eyes.

Cliff never knew just what happened during the ensuing half-minute. He was conscious of making an inarticulate noise in his throat when he tried to reassure her. Then he was on his feet and she was on

tiptoe and his arms were around her and her arms were around him, and there was a full minute of absolute silence in the big room.

Then Wong, the Chinese boy, padded in to break the spell, retreating apologetically when Cliff glared fiercely at him. An hour later, Cliff was on the porch, tilting on his hat to take to the steps—which he finally did after diving back into the livingroom eight times, on sudden and uncontrollable impulse.

In saddle, after another half hour on the porch and the steps that led to it, Cliff said good-bye for the dozenth time, but didn't leave. Instead, he reined Red to the steps and leaned down to pat her trim shoulder reassuringly. "Chin up, girl! Yuh ain't licked yet."

"Oh yes I am," she declared. "Even Mr. Seal says so. He's not a girl, but he's selling all his market stuff early, on account of the rustlers. He told me so, himself."

Cliff tilted his head back and laughed so uproariously that she looked puzzled. "Seal's afeared of rustlers, eh? Pritty rich, I call that!"

She looked still more mystified. "But I don't see anything funny about it."

"I'll diagram th' joke some other time. Speakin' of Seal, though, I'm advisin' an' requestin' yuh to keep a half a mile away from that thick-lipped gila monster if yuh hafta run to do it."

She agreed readily enough, but Cliff thought she looked a little hurt, so he said good-bye only eight times more and left with a rush that brought him back in sight of Black Rock just as dusk was purpling the dunes behind him and lights were winking on in the windows of the little nesters' cabins he passed.

DOC and Speck were on the walk in front of Doc's place when Cliff rode in from the hills. "How you feeling?" Doc asked, crooking his finger for Cliff to rein in by the walk.

"Finer than frog-hair," Cliff answered so heartily that Doc gave him an inquiring look. "I rid clean out to th' Tucker place an' back an' I feel as fresh as new paint. Fact is, I never took a ride in my life that done me as much good."

"Better lay off tonight if you rode that far," Doc advised, turning to go inside.

"I'll be bunkin' at th' jail, part of th' night," Cliff called after him, then addressed Speck: "How's Grimes actin'?"

"He was takin' a bath in a wash tub when I left," Speck grinned. "I made him do it outa regard fur th' public health; also, I slipped a shot of cattle dip inta th' water as a sanytary measure. I figgered if he got really clean onct it might change his disposition."

He reached for Red's rein. "Yuh better go wrangle some chuck. I've et already, so I'll put yur hawse up."

Cliff slid down. "Better give me th' key to th' jail."

"Gonna talk to Grimes?"

"Nope. Grimes is gonna talk to me."

Mayor Cook was in Bane's place and he sat at the table with Cliff while the latter ate a meal that would have alarmed Doc had he known of it. The mayor sipped his favorite gin and wild cherry frappe and gossiped of this and that, frequently pausing to drum abstractedly on the table with his fingertips and stare vacantly at the checkered cloth. Knowing that he had something on his mind, Cliff waited patiently, and it came: "I don't know whether or not it's strictly ethical for me to discuss it, but I wasn't placed on honor. The fact is that I've been wondering about Seal."

Cliff speared industriously at a piece of steak that was eluding his fork and remained silent, ears cocked, as the mayor went on: "The fact is that Seal is negotiating with us for a real estate loan of what I might call—er—exceptional size. Understand, his financial condition is so sound that the loan looks attractive, but his land holdings are small, and the loan he is ask-

ing is so large that it looks almost like he intended it as—er—well, a sale."

"Meanin' that he intends to hock his land heavy to yuh an' scallyhoot outa th' country?"

"Well—er—something like that. Yes, something about like that."

Cliff gestured emphatically with the fork. "As marshal, I'm tellin' yuh to serve th' purposes of law an' order by dilly-dallyin' along about that loan."

"How long?"

"Two weeks, anyway. I gotta reason." Cliff was remembering that Lucile had told him Seal was selling his market stuff early. He believed that Seal was about to leave the range, and one of his "hunches" was telling him that Seal would try to put over something big before he left.

"That will be easily arranged," the banker promised. "Our attorney will have to examine the abstract; I'll see to it that he takes his time. Also, I'll kill a little time, myself."

After finishing his meal, Cliff had a bottle of beer with the mayor, then left for the jail, which he found Speck had cleaned thoroly and supplied with two clean cots in the outer room.

When Cliff entered, Grimes was washing his tattered underwear in the same suds he had used in bathing. He began complaining, at once. "That depitty of your'n's been pesterin' me with questions ever since I been in here," he grumbled. "I reckon yuh're come to start in whar he left off."

Cliff looked sympathetic. "That's tough. I'll hafta speak to Speck about it. Takin' it all aroun' I feel plumb sorry fur yuh; an', anyway, I don't see no sense in askin' yuh to talk, now."

Immodestly, Grimes came to the bars, looking decidedly uneasy: "Why ain't they no sense in me talkin'? Gawd knows this Speck feller tried hard 'nuff to git me to."

"That was then, an' this is now," Cliff told him carelessly, then turned his back and sat down at the desk to do some imaginary book work.

Grimes paced the cell for a time, then came to the bars again: "Ain't yuh gonna ast me nothin' a-tall, no-time?"

Cliff poised his pen over a page and looked mildly annoyed. "Nope. We don't need yur evidence no more. Seal's talked a plenty—'nuff to close-pen yuh fur th' rest of yur life. Too bad yuh didn't turn state's evidence when yuh had th' chanct."

GLANCING around, Cliff felt defeated when he saw that the cunning, stubborn look had returned to Grimes' bearded face. "Tryin' to make out that Seal's been ringin' me in on somethin', eh?

"That's a damn lie. Jus' tell me one thing Seal says I done!"

"Hung a light in yur window an' put it out as a sign that I was in th' hotel so them rannies could come on in an' massacre me," Cliff charged — the only thing he knew Grimes to be guilty of, then turned back to his book. "That's all I'll tell yuh, right now. I'm busy."

The scratching of the marshal's pen and the tick of the alarm clock on the shelf dominated the little room for a time. Then, unexpectedly Grimes' blazing wrath burst all restraint. "So that damn snaky-eyed Seal has puked up his guts, has he?" he fairly screamed. "I'll fix him! I'll tell 'nuff about him to fill a book!"

Cliff shook his head doubtfully. "Too bad, but I reckon yuh're a little late. Anyway, it's my duty to warn yuh that anything yuh say may be used against yuh."

"I don't give a damn what's used 'ginst me so long's I git Seal's scalp," Grimes yelped, shaking the barred door in his rage. "I'll tell yuh I'll make a statement that'll—"

"Can't use 'er—don't need 'er." Cliff rose and stretched, then started for the door, stopping to say, "Course, I wanta be a good feller; so if yuh're bound to talk, I'll send Mayor Cook and Doc Livingston over. They kin take down what yuh gotta say, all reg'lur an' proper, 'thout anyone ever bein'

able to say yuh was under 'ficial pressure. I don't care a hoot in hell what yuh say, myself."

"Fetch 'em on!" Grimes howled. "Fetch th' hull damn town! I'll spout a mouthful!"

"Maybe we better git some clothes on yuh first," Cliff suggested dryly, barely managing to keep from laughing at the ludicrous naked figure dancing dervishlike in his rage.

When Cliff went to sleep that night on the cot in the front room, Grimes had been released on a promise of secrecy, and the marshal's head was pillowed on a written statement, properly witnessed. Hawkface had decided that legal forms should be observed in Tumbleweed county, and the Tucker murder was a Tumbleweed county case.

"Being the confession of an accessory, it is worthless unless corroborated by other direct testimony," the mayor had said.

"At that, I wouldn't take a jillion dollars for it," Cliff had declared. "That dun hawse standin' in th' alley is corroboration number one. We'll git some more of 'em.

"We're gonna take Bill Seal's hide an' hang it on th' fence! It'll be a good booger to kep coyotes away!"

CLIFF had arranged to have Speck awaken him at three. A half hour before that time he came bolt upright on his cot, rubbing sleep from his eyes so that he could locate his clothes. As he slipped on his trousers and boots he got an inkling of the source of the disturbance that had broken out somewhere over on the triangle, and was drawing nearer and becoming louder each second. By the time he got the door open he knew that Speck was coming, bringing old Grimes, who appeared to have broken all records for quick and complete inebriation.

"To hell with Bill Seal!" the old rascal roared in a voice that could not fail to carry to the town limits in all directions. "Bill Seal's a damn mushy-mouthed hypocrite! Damn two-faced cattle rustler!

"Bill Seal's big herd bull of th' valley gang. Bill Seal's—"

"Hush that yappin', yuh spindle-shanked ol' shitepoke, or I'll jam my six down yur scaly throat an' twist it aroun'," Speck's disgusted voice came from the darkness.

"Don't git ringy with me," Grimes blustered, as they left the walk by Bane's place and progressed toward the jail. "If yuh go to twistin' my tail, I'll tell th' marshal.

"Yessir, th' marshal's damn good feller—friend of mine. I signed a 'fession for th' marshal. Yessir, signed a 'fession tellin' how Bill Seal ramrodded that bank rob'ry then puked up his guts an' told out on us other fellers.

"Held out th' mazuma on us, too, Bill Seal did, damn him! I told th' marshal an' th' mayor an' Doc Livingston, an' I'm gonna tell th' hull world!

"Yessir, I'm gonna tell that—"

Grimes' speech ended in a gurgle, Speck had induced somehow. Cliff knew that he had been silenced too late. Lights had winked on in the houses adjacent to the jail; across the street to northward, Cliff saw a nightgowned figure on the porch of the home of Widow Smith. That meant that Grimes' "'fession" might as well have been printed in the newspapers. Cliff held the cell door open invitingly when Speck appeared, grasping his struggling prisoner by the collar with one hand while holding the other clamped over his slobbering mouth.

"Old devil raked a jug of forty-rod outa th' hay and had gargled about half of it by th' time I got onto him," Speck explained. "He shore did give th' American people a earful.

"What'll I do to hush him? Bust a six on his damn thick skull?"

"We orter, but we won't. Just chuck him back where he b'longs. We'll give him some more booze an' let him git plumb limbered."

"Don't need no more booze," Grimes managed to mumble past Speck's hand.

"Don't want no more booze 'less marshal says so. Marshal's my bes' friend. Do what marshal says, all time, yuh betchu."

"Awright, take a nap then," Cliff told him, then added, half in jest and half in earnest: "Better say some prayers 'fore yuh bed down. If yuh ain't committed suicide yuh shore have put in a half hour tryin'."

"Aw, booze never'll kill th' ol' gallynipper," Speck opined as he locked the cell door in Grimes' flushed, bewhiskered face.

"No, booze won't kill him," Cliff agreed soberly, "but Seal an' his gang will if we give 'em half a chanct."

"If they do they'll have one good deed to their credit," the disgusted deputy said as he commenced stripping off his belt preparatory to retiring.

Cliff left to go on duty in a disgusted state of mind. He had intended that confession to hit Bill Seal at a psychological time and out of a clear sky. Forewarned, the crafty Seal would know how to meet it. Publicly branded as an outlaw, two courses would be open to him:

He could leave the country in hot haste, or he could stay and brazen it out depending upon his standing in the community to far outweigh Grimes' accusations. In his heart, Cliff admitted that if Seal adopted the latter course he would win out, unless—

The marshal had one more trick up his sleeve. If it failed, Bill Seal's position would be impregnable.

CHAPTER X
FIELD DAY

TUMBLEWEED was in gala dress. Bunting left over from the Fourth of July celebration draped the store fronts and fluttered from ropes stretched across the single business street. The big parade with its pink-sashed marshals was over and the home pasture of Sheriff Gibbons' tidy little suburban ranch was crowded with people.

The first event, a potato race for cowgirls, had been staged, and the second contest, fancy trick roping, was well under way before Cliff Rudd gave more than a glance to the men and women on the field. Arriving just as the potato race started he had spent the time looking for a girl that he knew would stand out in any crowd as a rose on a background of range grass.

Then he saw her just entering the gate in a buckboard drawn by two pert little roach-maned roan broncs that shied and wrenched as their driver steered them by the tooting band and headed them into the lane of wagons and buggies that lined the field on all sides.

A hundred yards away, Cliff strode eagerly toward her, every fibre of his being thrilled to the expectation of a long stay in her company. Then he stopped to stand gazing slack-jawed at the driver of her buggy.

It was Bill Seal, almost dazzling in a white flannel shirt and breeches, with a bright blue neckcloth and the widest brimmed nutria hat Cliff had ever seen. Clean shaven—for once—with his sandy hair pomaded and brushed, his imposing physique showing to advantage in his well-fitted clothes, the big rancher looked entirely at ease and so supremely happy that Cliff commenced to shake with rage.

So, though he must have heard that old Grimes had denounced him, Seal had the face to brazen it out. Worse still, *she* was as brazenly compromising herself by appearing publicly with a man who had been branded publicly as an outlaw.

Poignant jealousy stabbing at him, Cliff started for the buggy, stamping in his stride as if he imagined Seal underneath the heels of his new picturated boots.

He could see her now, the sun-glow playing in the amber hair that showed below the eave of her chic lace parasol; the soft outline of her figure in its film of fleecy lawn.

Then, within yards of her, he stopped again, as though a rattler were stabbing in

his path. For her deep blue eyes meeting his for just a second, she had shrugged her trim shoulders, then deliberately turned her back.

His attention caught by her gesture, Seal had looked around quickly. Seeing Cliff, he grinned his characteristic leering grin, then parted his thick lips to whisper something to her and laugh aloud.

His fingers curving, Cliff took one quick step toward the buggy, then stopped again. When she flecked another glance at him out of the corner of her eye, he tilted up his head, spun on his heel and elbowed men right and left as he worked his way away from the spot. Ten minutes later, Hawkface Gibbons looked up in surprise when Cliff presented himself before him, as he was superintending the corraling of the wild broncs that would be used in the bucking-horse contest. "Gimme somethin' to do, Hawkface," Cliff pleaded. "I want a rough, he-man's job that'll make me fight an' wrestle to git it done."

Hawkface came as near grinning as he ever did. "I see, yuh been sick, an' yur feelin' oaty now, an' wanta work off some steam."

"No. I was feelin' oaty an' I'm feelin' sick now, but I gotta work off some steam—on somethin' or somebody."

"Got some plumb ringy steers that th' boys is gonna ride after a bit. Yuh might help put th' rope cinches on 'em an' wrestle 'em inta th' chute. Tough work, though, an' bein's yuh're company—"

"Bully! Just th' job I want. Them steers is th' secont things I'd like to rope-cinch an' wrangle inta a chute quirtin' hell outa 'em till their backs kink."

"Awright," Hawkface agreed. "I don't know what yuh'd ruther handle than steers, but, th' way yuh're lookin' I hope it ain't me.

"Whatsamatter with yuh, anyway? Somebody up an' whack yuh on th' snoot?"

"Nope—just spit in my face is all. Which corral did yuh say them steers is in?"

THROUGHOUT the forenoon, Cliff worked savagely in the corrals and chutes, hazing and cinching steers and working the releases of the chutes. At noon when the crowd swarmed off the grounds to go into town for lunch and two hours of relaxation, he sat on the corral gate smoking and moping. He had expected it to be the biggest day of his life; instead it was the most dismal. He had not gone back to where her roach-maned roans stood, but, twice during the forenoon, he had caught sight of them, and each time Seal was on the cushion beside her.

Damn and double damn!

Reassembling at two, the crowd cheered lustily as the steer wrestling and bucking-horse riding contests were reeled off like clock-work, under Hawkface Gibbons' capable supervision. Ordinarily, the latter event would have been the feature of the day in Cliff's mind, and he probably would have been one of the contestants. But, on this day, he had no heart for sports, and all his interest was centered on the pistol match. It was four o'clock when Hawkface announced it by riding around the field limits and bawling, "Six-gun shootin' contest will now take place, alongside th' bandstand!"

Despondently Cliff fell in with the crowd that had been hanging around the chutes, going with them to the bandstand, where he found little Brainard installed as target keeper and scorer.

The arrangements had been simple and easily made. A low knoll furnished an earthwork before which was a row of pine boxes. Brainard had a number of paper targets, each containing an inch center dot and three surrounding rings, spaced an inch apart. Each contestant was to shoot in turn, his target to be picked up and scored by Brainard, with Hawkface serving as the last court of appeal in case of a disputed decision.

As soon as he came in sight of the place, Cliff grated his even teeth in a black rage

that was almost murderous in its intensity. The fluffy little parasol was there, only a little way aside from the firing line. Holding it awkwardly in his great, strong fingers, Bill Seal was smiling down at the girl, on his heavy face an air of proprietorship that could not be mistaken. Cliff stopped on the opposite side of the open space that had been roped off. Despite his valiant efforts to ignore the couple under the fluffy parasol, his eyes would stray that way, and once he thought he caught her looking at him.

The shooting began—first for boys under twelve, at eight yards, then a match for ladies at ten. A buzz of excited comment waved through the crowd when Hawkface's raucous voice rose to announce, "Nex' 'vent'll be six-gun shootin, at fifteen yards, fifteen-secont time limit!" By which he meant that the contestant stood fifteen yards from the target with his gun holstered and his hand in front of him and above his waistline. At the call of "time," he must draw and fire six shots within the time limit, a bullseye scoring twenty-five points, the first circle ten, the second circle five, the third circle two, and, outside that, but one point for hitting the target.

Cliff watched disinterestedly while three youths, one of them slightly intoxicated, shot with small success. Then a bearded patriarch addressed affectionately by the sheriff as "Uncle Joe," slapped four into the bullseye, and two into the first ring for a score of 120.

Bull Dobbs and the Swede shot, without upsetting the old man's score.

Two more contestants tried, one, a sober faced young rancher in denim overalls and gingham shirt, managing to tie Uncle Joe's score. He was followed by a nervous little man with horn-rim glasses who whanged all the lead out of his gun in eight seconds, scoring but 75 points.

Not so good, any of it. Disgruntled, thoroly bored, Cliff had kept his eyes on Seal. Now he saw the rancher hand the parasol to Lucile and turn and swagger to the firing line, his every movement and gesture eloquent of supreme confidence.

Cliff had resisted temptations to participate in the bucking-horse riding, the steer roping and wrestling. He had not intended to take a try at the shooting. But now, with Seal appearing as the girl's champion, he found himself running through the crowd and stepping in beside him.

"Shootin'?" Hawkface inquired, as little Brainard pottered about the big goods box against which Seal's target had been pinned.

"Yeh," Cliff answered, shortly.

Seal turned to him, his eternal cynical smile parting his thick lips. The pale eyes glinted as he said with deliberate challenge: "Me an' yuh for it, I reckon. Too bad we ain't shootin' at each other, 'stead of at a damn chunk of paper."

"Ain't too late to change th' program," Cliff came back, his suppressed wrath boiling. "Just step off yur distance an' say when."

Seal's heavy face grew apoplectic and he took a half step toward Cliff. "Why, damn yuh, I'll—"

"Hey!" Hawkface piped, squirming in between them, "Can't yuh two young sprouts keep holt of yurselves fur one day?

"Git back there, Cliff! Go 'head an' shoot, Seal!"

ALREADY getting control of himself, Cliff stepped back. Growling something indistinguishable, Seal turned toward the target, cursing when he saw that Brainard still was fussing about it. Finally, the little scientist stepped clear, nervously rubbing dirt from his white palms.

"Time!" Hawkface barked.

Seal's gun slid from its holster, belching lead in what seemed to be a continuous roar. The crowd already was applauding wildly when Brainard examined the target and held up six fingers, indicating a perfect score, while Mayor Stiles, who was timekeeper, bawled, "Thir-teen sec-onts!"

Seal turned to Cliff, triumph in his pale eyes. "Reckon that'll hold yuh."

"Mebbe," Cliff answered, his teeth barely parting to allow the word to pass.

"Time!" Hawkface chirped.

Cliff's hip appeared to erupt in flame and smoke, and he had holstered the six and turned away when Brainard again held up six fingers, and Stiles wheezed, "E-lev-en sec-onts."

"Yuh win," Hawkface told Cliff, thwacking him heartily on the shoulder blades. "Th' rules is that if both of yuh git a clean score, th' one that has th' best time—"

The sheriff left off talking and leaped pantherishly after Seal, who had suddenly turned livid and charged at little Brainard—who still was tinkering with the target stands, although the match was over.

Cliff was right behind Hawkface when he clutched Seal's arm, only to be shaken off as the rancher plunged after Brainard—who had paled and taken to his heels, diving into the crowd on the sidelines. Cliff cut after Seal, thrusting out a foot that tripped the big rancher, throwing him flat, while the crowd boiled about them in wild confusion, giving Brainard his opportunity. Head low, he dived between the legs of those surrounding him and scuttled out of sight in the press.

Seal rose, his flushed face a thundercloud. Cliff returned him glare for glare. But always the little sheriff was between them, and at his order, a circle of men surrounded each of them, hustling them apart and toward two different exits.

"Whew!" Hawkface exploded a few minutes later, as he walked townward alongside Cliff. "Yuh two rannies shore did hanker fur a look at each other's innards!

"Hell, man, I'm s'prised at yuh! What did yuh wanta go gunnin' fur Seal fur on account of a little ol' shootin' match?"

"Shootin' match?" Cliff parroted. "Oh, yes, we did have a shootin' match, didn't we. Who won it?"

"Yuh won it, yuh dawg-gone day dreamer! Th' first prize is a damn good gold watch, at that. I gotta damn good notion not to give it to yuh, bein' yuh're so ding-whanged disinterested.

"What th' hell's eatin' on yuh, anyway? Here we toll Seal along till we git him just where we want him, then yuh hafta up an' go loco, an'—"

"Loco—yeh, that's it," Cliff cut in as he looked ahead along the hot, dusty street and glimpsed a slender, lawn-clad figure expertly driving the prancing red roans townward up the sandy road.

"Loco," Cliff repeated. "Loco as any other maverick ever gits."

CHAPTER XI

OLD LEAD AND NEW

BRAINARD drew six battered bits of lead from his pocket and laid them on the oblong of dying sunshine on the sheriff's pine desk. He rapped the desktop with another slug he had dumped from an envelope. "This is the bullet that killed Lem Tucker," he said to Cliff and Hawkface, then added with emphasis, "These others were fired by Seal this afternoon. All seven were shot out of the same gun. You gentlemen know what that means."

"Ain't surprised none," Hawkface said, then looked thoughtfully out through the dusty window. "I swear I don't know what to do next.

"Yuh see, this bein' Frontier Day, I kinda 'greed not to jug anybody that come to town. Same time, I know that Seal's onto our scheme an' may pull outa th' country, any time. Yuh seen th' way he tore inta Brainard, when Brainard was diggin' them slugs outa th' box."

Brainard smiled proudly. "There was dirt in the box I pinned Seal's target on, and no one else shot at that box at all. I tell you the proof is positive. The bullet that killed Tucker came from Seal's gun."

"Good job," Cliff applauded as Brainard repocketed the slugs and sat down on a corner of the desk. "This shootin' match was a clever trap, an' Seal walked right inta it."

"Yeh, an' now he's walkin' right outa it," the sheriff growled, looking interestedly out of the window. "There he goes hightailin' it fur home as fast as his big dun hawse kin sift sand!"

He came back and sat down in a cane bottomed chair and heaved his feet to the desktop. "Oh, well, let 'im go. If it was any other time, I'd foller 'im an' noose 'im.

"Tonight's a big night in town, though, an' I just can't leave. Me an' th' boys hasta run th' wild bunch out an' keep cases on th' home boys. With th' dance hall open an' th' merry-go-round a-runnin', an' a big poker game on, things won't quiet down till plumb mornin'."

"I'll go-git 'im for yuh if yuh say so," Cliff offered, eagerly.

Hawkface stiffened. "Not by a damn sight. Yuh're all right, Rudd, an' I ain't sayin' that yuh wouldn't tackle th' job plumb willin'.

"But I'm sheriffin' Tumbleweed, an' I ain't gonna have it said that another officer had to come in here an' corral Lem Tucker's murderer. Furdermore, from th' way yuh an' Seal horned dirt an' kinked yur tails and bellered ev'ry time yuh laid eyes on each other today, I don't figger anybody would git arrested if yuh went after Seal. It 'ud be a killin'."

"Maybe yur right," Cliff admitted. "It's yur case, an' I won't horn in on it, after yuh boys cinched ev'rything."

"Take a little credit yourself," Brainard objected. "After all, it was you who asked Gibbons to get up this shooting match so that we could get our evidence."

"When it comes to that," Hawkface said, "Lem Tucker's girl is entitled to as much credit as any of us. If it hadn't been fur her, we never could uv put it over."

When Cliff looked at him in surprise, the sheriff went on. "Hell, ain't yuh wised up yet? Did yuh think Lucile let that big gorriller hang aroun' her all day just 'cause she likes him?

"Huh! Seal wasn't gonna shoot—wasn't even comin' to town till she coaxed him inta it. She had to coax him some more to git him to shoot, too. I tell yuh, when it comes to smart girls, Lucile's—

"Hey! Where th' hell yuh goin'?"

"Don't know," Cliff answered as he bolted through the door. "I know what I'm gonna do when I git there, though."

CLIFF searched the town thoroly, finding no trace of Lucile. Finally, by discreet inquiry at the feedlot, he found that she had driven in from the Frontier grounds, watered her team and driven on home. Disappointed, Cliff fed and groomed Red and left to take a turn about town while the horse was eating.

With the approach of night, the carnival spirit had commenced to grip Tumbleweed. On the vacant lot next to the saloon, a merry-go-round spun by a gaily caparisoned mule had commenced to accommodate early patrons, its mechanical organ dolorously grinding out "Nellie Grey." Cliff had passed it and the canvas shooting gallery when he saw Bull Dobbs, Banty and the Swede starting to try their luck at the doll baby rack that was being touted by a purple faced barker. Cliff was highly surprised when, upon seeing him, Bull slipped him a sly wink, then commenced coaxing his two pals to play the dolls. When they commenced throwing balls at the little wooden dummies, he sidled over to where Cliff was leaning against the corner of a building. "Wanta see yuh private," the outlaw whispered huskily out of a corner of his bearded mouth.

"Back room of th' saloon," Cliff whispered back.

"Awright. Be there in five minutes." Bull sidled back to the rack, and was ready to take his turn at the dolls

Cliff strolled into the saloon, elbowed his way to the bar for two bottles of beer which he carried to the little room at the rear, within a minute Bull entered, almost on a trot, and glancing uneasily over his shoulder. "I snuck away from them waddies," he rumbled out of one corner of his mouth while applying the beer bottle to the other. "Gotta talk fast, an' I got a earful to slip yuh."

"Shoot." Cliff was all interest.

"Better watch Grimes," Bull said, earnestly, then dropped his mumbling voice still lower: "I know yuh're onto us—onto Seal, too.

"Th' damn double-crosser has done us dirt a plenty—got away with our mazuma, yuh know."

"So I've heard."

Bull nodded his shaggy head vigorously: "Yeh, I reckon yuh've heared most ever'thing, except what I'm gonna tell yuh, now. It's this: Th' valley gang is splittin' up. Seal's tryin' to hold 'em together a little longer. Wants to use us, then flim-flam us again, I reckon."

"Yeh? Well, where do I come in on that?"

"That's what I'm tellin' yuh. Seal's gonna beef Grimes some way, to git even with him. Then, he's gonna pull one more big job an' skeedaddle."

"When?"

"That's what I don't know yet—won't know till mornin'. Quick as I find out, I'll come to Black Rock an' let yuh know.

"I gotta go now. Better look after Grimes, if yuh want him to live to be a witness."

Bull shambled out. Watching through the crack of the door, Cliff saw that he was at the bar, ordering, when Banty and the Swede worked their way through the crowd to line up beside him. Bull pointed to the clock, then they drank three whiskeys in rapid succession and left. Cliff understood. It was sunset, and Hawkface had forbidden Badlanders to remain in town after nightfall. The thought reminded him that he had promised to help run the gangsters out, so he hunted up the sheriff whom he found already combing the streets and alleys, with his deputies.

It was a tribute to the peppery little sheriff's reputation that the officers had little to do, their chief difficulty being in managing to work their way along the humanity-packed walks. Hawkface had to speak a short word to a pair of low-browed ruffians who had lingered in the saloon after saddling their broncs and tying them out front. Ben reported having to gun-whip a bibulous visitor who had worn out his welcome at the merry-go-round by sitting backward on his wooden elk and jovially squirting tobacco juice into the eyes of whoever rode the following horse. "Well, that's th' crop, I reckon," Hawkface announced, after he and Cliff had assisted Ben in carrying the mutinous one bodily to jail. "I'm 'bliged to yuh, Rudd, but I reckon me an' th' boys kin make out from now on." As they turned back toward the street after watching Ben lock the jail door, the sheriff added, thoughtfully: "I been thinkin' things over, Rudd, an' I've 'bout made up my mind that our best shot is fur Black Rock an' Tumbleweed to team up an' sweep out them Badlands—I mean, run 'em out or lug 'em out in pine boxes."

"Say when," Cliff agreed, readily. "I reckon Black Rock's in a humor to do her part, prompt an' vigorous. I gotta ramble home now. See yuh in a day or two."

"I'll be throwin' a loop on Seal tomorrow," Hawkface said in parting. "Some time soon after that, we better put on th' big drive."

THE night had come when Cliff headed Red into the dunes, but a bright moon directly overhead silvered the winding wagon trail and lightened the brown of the prairie to a pale tan. A mile from town Cliff overtook a young nester on a rickety white horse, and slowed Red so that the

two might ride in company.

Idle discussion of this and that helping to pass the time, they had left the sand for the harder footing along the north rim of the Badlands, when, some distance ahead and a little to their right, a shot ripped out, followed by several others in rapid succession.

"Some of th' boys hes been mixin' red-eye with their powder," the nester said philosophically. "That sounds like it was at th' fork where th' road cuts th' trail to th' Circle-Eight."

The two jogged on, the hooves of their mounts crunching the soft sand of the wheel-rutted road. After a half mile, they passed the fork where a dimmer trail wound northward toward the Circle-Eight. A little farther on, they took to a decline at the foot of which mirrored stars danced and scintillated on the rippling face of Badger Creek. After splashing through the gravelly stream and breasting the slope beyond, the nester slowed and reined the white nag into a dim bridlepath that followed the creek southward. "Well, I'm leavin' yuh here. My place is down there in them cottonwoods. When yuh're out this way, drop in an'—"

The nester left off speaking and jammed the white nag against Red as though for protection. Cliff could see the man shiver in superstitious terror — and not without good cause. For, from the right had sounded a long-drawn, agonized call that had died to a succession of jerky, deep-chested groans.

Cliff looked the moonlit terrain over quickly. A rabbit could have been seen on the buffalo grass of the upper flat. The waving willows that fringed the creek, and a small cedar brake over to the left of them furnished the only visible cover. As Cliff headed Red for the cedars, the eerie call came again, ending suddenly as though the breath of the caller had been cut short.

Nothing in sight on the near side of the cedars. Cliff reined Red between the clump and the willows, almost ramming him head on against a saddled horse, a little further on, a human lay sprawled half in the light and half in the shadow of the trees.

Snorting, Red sat back on his haunches as Cliff left saddle to bend over the still form. One look was sufficient. The upturned face was the ugly, bearded countenance of Bull Dobbs. As Cliff dropped to his knees beside it, the lines of agony disappeared as though they had been ironed away, and the jerky, almost explosive breathing suddenly became inaudible.

"Gawd, he's dead," came in an awed voice from the nester, who had managed to keep his white nag at Red's heels, and had just dismounted.

Cliff dropped an ear to the fallen man's chest. The heart was beating, falteringly, and the breathing was faint and irregular. The marshal ran an explorative hand inside the flannel shirt, and the palm came away sticky with blood from a shoulder wound that did not seem to be serious enough to account for the man's condition. Another clean wound found in the man's thigh near the hip also failed to account for the growing red pool beside him. Cliff caught an arm to roll him over, and the mystery was explained. The gun-wrist was shattered, and blood was squirting from the wound with a pumplike regularity that told that an artery had been severed.

Cliff worked quickly. Ripping the sleeve from the damaged arm, he cut a strip from it with his jack-knife and tied it about the wrist above the wound, forming a tourniquet by using a cedar stick to twist the strip of cloth tight.

Fifteen minutes later, Bull's naked body lay on a crude pine bed in the nester's bachelor shanty down the creek. The wounds in the shoulder and hip had been sluiced with burning horse liniment and plugged with quids of chewing tobacco bound on with strips of the only clean cloth in the shanty—the nester's other Sunday shirt. Cliff sat by the bed, watching the wrist and occasionally partially loosening

the tourniquet, while the nester quirted his bony white nag toward Tumbleweed to bring the doctor.

Two hours that seemed to be two years elapsed before a horse galloped into the cluttered yard outside and Tumbleweed's blond young "city-schooled" physician burst in, opening his surgical kit as he sat down beside the bed. Wisely allowing Cliff's bandages to remain on the other wounds—though he frowned professionally at sight of the tobacco stains—he tied the artery with sure skill, disinfected and bandaged the wrist, then smiled dubiously in answer to Cliff's inquiring look. "If he were just a man, I might give him up; but these plainsmen—"

He shrugged and sat down, sluicing his hands in the washbasin of antiseptic solution on the floor. "I don't know just how one would go about it to kill one of these renegade fellows," he went on, and commenced drying his white hands on his own handkerchief, after a disdainful look at the nester's towel. "They put chewing tobacco on each other's wounds. Ugh! Enough to poison the system of a billygoat! They use horse liniment as a dressing! Ugh! *Horse Liniment,* a simple counter-irritant, without a particle of antiseptic virtue!

"They swear by these remedies and they persist in using them, and the queer part of it is that blood poison never results and the patient almost invariably recovers.

"Considering all that, my opinion — damned unprofessional opinion is — that this fellow will live to rustle more cattle and dry-gulch more good citizens."

Cliff was growing restive. "Yeh, but when'll he talk?"

THE surgeon looked at him quizzically. "Am I correct in seeming to remember that somebody told me you were an officer?"

"Yeh. I want some information from this geezer, an' I want it right now."

"Then, actin' as a good citizen, and as a damned poor doctor, I'll see what we can do." Going to the door, he got a flask of brandy from the saddlebags he had dropped there. Pouring an ounce or so into a goblet, he carefully dribbled a few drops into it from a small phial and sluiced the mixture down Bull's throat, then held the phial to his nostrils.

The outlaw stirred feebly, raised his eyelids, dropped them again, then squirmed and cursed and came wide awake. Rational at once, he commenced gabbling as soon as his eyes lighted on Cliff. "Git busy, feller! Go-git Seal, if yuh ever 'spect to.

"Lissen. Me an' him an' Banty an' th' Swede an' some of Seal's punchers met over by them cedars to talk things over. Me an' some of th' other boys was sore at Seal fur double-crossin' us about th' bank's cash. He wanted to do 'nother job tonight, an' when I got balky, him an' Banty an' two-three others cracked down on me. I slid off my hawse when I seen 'em draw, but I ketched plenty lead. They thought I was dead, an' fanned it.

"After a bit, I heard hawses an' yelled to beat hell, an'—"

"Yeh, I know," Cliff broke in. "What did they do, then?"

"Rambled off two ways. Th' main bunch of 'em cut south, where they got Seal's cattle an' th' Circle-Eight stuff rounded up, ready to shoot 'em inta th' Badlands as soon as daylight comes. They picked this time, knowin' that th' Circle-Eight riders would be in town today, an' tonight.

"Like I say, they rounded them cattle up 'fore night, an' are close-herdin' 'em, waitin' fur mornin'.

"Meanwhilst, Seal an' a few of his punchers is gonna peel th' Circle-Eight hawse corrals clean an' take what they want from th' house.

"I said, *take what they want*, unnerstan', an' what Seal wants most is that *girl*."

Cliff felt his entire body chill, then another thought came. "But, he wouldn't harm Lucile Tucker. Him an' her put in th' day together."

Bull chuckled shakily. "Yeh, they put in th' day together, an' he put in th' evenin' tellin' what he was gonna do to git even with her fur makin' a fool outa him an' playin' in with yuh an' Hawkface.

"Take it or leave it, I'm tellin' yuh she goes through th' Badlands along with them stock—an' Seal."

Already on his feet, Cliff whirled back to Doc. "Yuh said a bit ago yuh was a good citizen first, an' a doctor afterwards.

"Awright. Straddle yur hawse an' quirt him to town an' tell Hawkface Gibbons th' lay!"

"But, I can't leave this fellow here to—"

"He'll be awright. I hear that nester feller shakin' his rickety hawse down th' trail. He'll look after him. Tell Gibbons to git a bunch an' hit for that knoll by th' waterhole where he seen me the first time he ever laid eyes on me. Th' wash that leads inta th' Badlands opens right back of that knoll. If he eases aroun' there real quiet, he'll be ready to stop that drive in th' mornin'."

Bull's voice came again, a little stronger, now. "But, hell, feller, yuh ain't gonna go c'mit suicide by tacklin' Seal an' his bunch at th' ranch all by yur lonesome, are yuh?"

Already bounding for the door, Cliff threw one word back over his shoulder:

"Yeh!"

CHAPTER XII

SEAL STRIKES

LUCILE TUCKER was having a dreary, miserable evening. After toying with her dinner, she had wiped china and glassware while Wong washed it. Later, she retired to the big empty livingroom where she tried to read a book while back in the kitchen, Wong rattled pans and sang dolefully in pidgin English.

The girl could not be said to be afraid, even uneasy. But it was the first time all of the hands had been off the ranch at one time and she was unutterably lonely.

In addition—well, of course, it may have been hard for Cliff to understand her actions with Seal. Still he might have trusted her and—

By ten o'clock, she had worked herself into the proper mood, so she turned the lamp down and cuddled on the heavy horsehair sofa to enjoy a good comfortable cry. She felt cheated when, as she had gotten well started and had commenced to enjoy it, barefooted Wong pattered in, cooing out guttural inquiries as to what was ailing the "li'l Missee."

"Nothing—nothing at all," she told him shortly. "Go on back to your work, please."

"Workee done," he reported, cheerfully, but he padded away dutifully after giving a bit of parting advice. "Better dlink more tlea an' go bed. Wong feed um cat an' close um house, bye-um-bye."

The advice appeared good. She could finish that comfortable cry upstairs. She had risen and taken up the lamp, when she heard a horse coming up the lane at a keen jog.

She felt balked again. She wanted to cry, and maidenly pride forbade that she do it because Cliff had misunderstood her. She wanted to tell herself that she was crying because the hands were all off the ranch for the first time since she was born; and now one of the boys was mean enough to come home unexpectedly and spoil the fun of it.

Which one of the four punchers could it be? Setting the lamp on the center table, she tripped into the adjacent dining room where there was no light, and parted the chintz curtains to peer out at the moonlit lawn and the lane beyond. A little expression of disgust and anger escaped her lips.

Instead of crossing the front of the house and going to the corrals, the rider had blundered almost against the wire netting fence of the south orchard.

Drunk of course. Her surprise and disgust increased when, after following the fence for a little way, he dismounted and

tied his horse to it, then hitched his belt and started for the house. But as he came on, taking quick, firm strides, she saw that he wasn't drunk and that he was none of her boys. In fact, he was no one she remembered ever having seen before.

Strange hour for a stranger to call. More curious than uneasy, she went back into the living room, unconsciously smoothing her hair with one hand as she turned the lamp up with the other.

There was nothing furtive about the actions of the visitor, even if he had seemed to be hiding his horse out there. His boot-heels and spurs announced his coming as he crossed the wide porch and his rap on the casing was almost imperative. Wonderingly, she went to the screen but did not unhook it.

She could see him plainly now, tall and lean and quick-moving as he removed his hat, disclosing a red head and a homely freckled face that caused her to unfasten the screen without hesitation and ask him in. "Yuh Miss Tucker?" he asked, as he stepped across the threshold.

When she answered in the affirmative, he grinned broadly, as he looked her over with a cool appraisal that would have been resented as an impertinence in any other person she ever had seen. "No wonder," he said cryptically.

"No wonder what?" she asked, commencing to burn a little inwardly.

"No wonder Cliff Rudd polices th' Circle-Eight a little, as well as actin' as marshal of Black Rock.

"Now, don't git het up like that, Miss. I'm Cliff's deputy, yuh know. Th' name is Speck."

Seeing the star on his suspender, she smiled in spite of herself, and motioned toward a tidied rocker by the bay window, seating herself on the sofa. His face had sobered, and his voice grew suddenly brisk as he asked: "How many rannihans yuh got about th' ranch, right now?"

"None. I only keep four hands. They're all in Tumbleweed. It's a big night there, and—

"Beg pardon."

HE HAD sworn beneath his breath and started pacing nervously about the room. He turned to her, twirling his hat awkwardly between supple fingers. Again the keen grey eyes appraised her thoughtfully. "May as well come clean, I reckon," he told her, then sat down and crossed his corduroyed legs and commenced to talk rapidly:

"Don't wanta fret yuh none, but I hafta. I stayed at Black Rock, while th' hull town 'cept some lame ol' pappies an' gran'mas an' a few kids oozed over to Tumbleweed fur th' day.

"Th' stores was all closed but th' bank an' th' postoffice an' Bane's place. Th' streets was plumb empty, too, till 'long late this afternoon, I was sittin' in Doc's doorway havin' a smoke, when I seen two hard lookin' waddies come ridin' in from th' east. One of 'em was a bow-legged little Mexican with th' longest moustache I ever seen on a human. The other'n was shaved smooth and was younger, but not a durn bit prettier to look at. Both of 'em had faces that 'ud sour milk."

"That was a rider called Black Pedro and his son," she told him, wonderingly. "They ride for Bill Seal."

"So I found out, later. Anyway, they eyed me a plenty as they went past, but I thought they was ridin' through, so I didn't palaver with 'em none.

"When they got to th' hotel corner, th' feller with th' cat tails in th' corner of his mouth turned west, an' th' other gazabo turned east. I thought that was funny, but I didn't do anything, right then—just set there finishin' my cigaroot.

"Then, first thing I knowed, I seen smoke comin' from th' feedlot, an' started to sashay down there on th' jump. Goin' down th' north side, I happent to look towards th' alley, an' seen that greaser with th'

corn-tasseled face lopin' towards th' jail like hell a beatin'—I mean plenty fast.

"Well, I sprinted across th' alley an' along Bane's buildin' an' got to th' jail just as he rid behind it. I galloped aroun' where he was an' found him with his hawse tucked against the buildin'. He dragged out a six an' was about to crack down on Ol' Grimes through th' high winder when I yanked him off his hawse an' rid 'im around th' yard till he quit buckin'.

"What I done next I wouldn't a dared done if Cliff had been there. I wouldn't a done it anyway if what few people left in town hadn't been down at th' feedlot tryin' to put out th' fire—which same that little greaser had started to keep attention away from th' jail.

"But, I was peeved a plenty, an' besides, I didn't like that moustache no way. I hazed him inside, strapped him over Cliff's bunk an' went to work on him with a piece of board, th' i-dee bein' to kinda mellow him, yuh know. He looked hard."

"But that's against the law; and, besides, it's cruel," Lucile couldn't help saying, indignantly.

He didn't look a bit chastened. "Yeh, I know. Th' law was made fur humans. Pieces of board is good things to use on snakes.

"Anyway, after I'd 'bout wored out my hands an' his pants, he got talkative. Seems like that pine board jarred th' roots of his tongue an' it got floppy.

"Th' burden of his song was that Seal an' his half-humans is gonna give yuh a surprise party tonight—any time now, in fact."

She rose in her excitement and stepped close to him. "Surprise party?"

"Yeh." Quickly he told her of the plan, just as Bull Dobbs was telling it to Cliff Rudd, at about that same time.

She reseated herself and sat silent until he had finished, then she asked with a composure that surprised herself and brought a look of admiration to his keen eyes, "And what do you think we had better do?"

"Git out," he advised. "Fork a hawse an' fan it to Tumbleweed fur help."

She looked at him steadily. "And you?"

Speck looked slightly embarrassed. "Me? Oh, I'll kinda skulk aroun' here an' see what happens. Yuh're a friend of Cliff's—darn close friend, so I'm thinkin'. He'd want me to stick."

She came to her feet and her head tilted back. Without a word she crossed the room and took her father's scarred-stocked rifle from the antler rack above the mantel.

"Some girl," he said admiringly, "but don't yuh think yuh better go?"

"I'm a Tucker," she said, simply. "Do we make a stand in the house, or outside?"

"Yuh're hell bent on stickin'?"

"Yes."

"Better go buck off that white dress then, an' git inta something darker. Incidental, where do yuh sleep?"

"Upstairs—northwest room."

"Carry th' lamp up there, then, an' don't fetch it back. Turn it low an' draw th' shades like yuh was stayin' up there. We kin bumfoozle them that much, anyway. But I'm still sayin' yuh better—"

She shook her amber head, took the lamp and went swiftly upstairs where she changed to a dark grey flannel riding habit. When she came back down, the moonlight streaming through the bay window showed her that he had bullied Wong from the kitchen to the front room and armed him with a long-barreled frontier six he had taken from the rack. "Watch th' front door an' winders," he ordered the whimpering Chinese sternly. "When th' rukus starts, crack down on anybody that shows up there.

"Yuh better keep a eye on th' corrals, Miss. If yuh don't mind, I'm gonna kinda scout over th' place an' git th' lay."

CROUCHED by the window, the girl heard Speck tramp to the rear of the house, where he pottered about for some time, scratching a match occasionally.

Once, she saw him go through the side yard and circle the corrals. A little later, she heard him return, locking the kitchen door, and remaining back there, for the time being.

Scattered clouds now drifted across the face of the moon, starting a parade of mottled shadows across the yard and occasionally darkening the outside world for minute intervals. Steady as she thought her nerves were, she shrank and clutched the rifle tighter when the big clock on the mantel gonged out the first stroke of midnight. Then, as though in answer to that boomed signal, a body of mounted men surged into the yard from the front and jingled back to the corrals. She set her even teeth and felt her fighting spirit flame when she realized that Seal was making no attempt at stealth.

As they halted and dismounted, partly obscured in the half light, she heard a movement beside her, and knew that Speck was there. A little later, he caught her arm and drew her a little aside from the window, but in a position where she still could shoot through it. "Hold yur lead till I start triggerin'," he whispered, then went to where Wong was—a diminutive, white figure tucked below the sill of the next window. She heard him answer in exasperation when a darker cloud swung over the moon, inking the yard until only the outlines of the fences and buildings could be traced.

Then Seal's powerful, arrogant voice boomed out of the darkness:

"Git a move on yuh, yuh jugheads! Open that there gate, Banty! Coupla yuh others ride in there an' haze 'em out!"

There was a staccato of hoofbeats in answer to the crisp command. The hasp of the gate rattled metallically and—

The rear of the house shook to the roar of an explosion that rattled the panes of the window beside her and started a bedlam of din outside.

Somewhere, a man shrieked in pain and anger and Seal's voice came again: "Banty's down! It's that damn hellcat of a girl! She's in th' kitchen! Let 'er have it, same as if she was a man!"

A pistol barked, then another and another till pinpoints of flame slashed the darkness beyond the gate, and sent lead slithering through the kitchen smashing panes, rending wood and belling against the pots and pans. Before she had had time to wonder greatly over it, Speck was beside her again, bending down to chuckle into her ear: "Little side-show before th' main circus opens. I found a ol' muzzle loadin' shotgun in th' storeroom an' loaded it with plenty powder an' 'bout a teacupful of buckshot. While th' moon was bright, I laid it acrost th' kitchen table an' sighted it at the fastenin' of that gate. I just touched off th' fireworks by pullin' th' string I had fastened to th' trigger."

He chuckled again, then moved away. Seal's angry bellow rose in a succession of crisp orders, and, as the denser cloud passed, the light strengthened in time to show her another man swinging the gate open and two riders shooting their mounts inside. She glanced at the other window just in time to see Wong tilt his heavy pistol over the sill, duck his head against his thin chest and fire with a hand so limp with excitement that the gun kicked free and clattered to the floor.

There was a second or so of respite; then the storm of lead that had been drilling through the walls of the kitchen swung to the room where they were, smashing glass almost into her face, riving out great splinters from the sills and casings, sending little cascades of shattered plaster dribbling to the floor. Half blinded by the plaster dust, her ears punished by the crashing volleys without, she saw Speck's gun flashing and raised her own rifle. Aiming as best she could, she levered it empty, then leaned against the wall to refill the magazine from the belt she had laid on the floor.

As she finished reloading, she saw the line of pistol fire in the yard separate suddenly, some of the flames leaping westward,

instead of toward the house. The explanation came a moment later when the moon cleared for seconds and she saw a rider bear down from the lane, his pistols flaming as he rode past the house, just as the lawn darkened again.

One of the boys was returning—perhaps with more of them behind him. Her spirits soared, then sank to new depths when in the now hazy yard, she saw the lone rider leave saddle as though plucked from it by some mighty unseen hand. As he thudded down, the horse stopped and whirled back to stand by, head down, as though to protect the fallen master.

The firing outside stilled. The explanation came when the horseherd crowded through the open gate and thundered past the rear of the house.

Then out of the darkness Seal's taunting voice came again: "I'm leavin' out. Gotta rod these jugheads while they steer them hawses to where I'm wantin' 'em put.

"Don't cry none, though. I'll be back after a bit . . . Uh-huh! I'll be back . . . An' remember this: If yuh leave outa here whilst I'm gone, I'll foller yuh, an' wherever yuh go, I'll find yuh . . . Yuh kin bet on that!"

Leaning recklessly out of the window in his rage, Speck fired at the location of the voice, but without success. He was starting to draw his head back in, when the light came strong again, showing that the backyard was empty. Suddenly he drew his body back and chattered excitedly. "That's Cliff Rudd layin' out there! I'd know that hawse of his anywheres!"

He leaped for the door, but the girl was ahead of him, fear spurring her as she raced across the lawn. She dropped to her knees shrilling in delight when the fallen man rolled slowly to a sitting posture and leaned toward her, muttering incoherently.

"Oh, Cliff, where are you shot, honey?" she quavered, catching him by the shoulders and steadying him against her.

"Ain't shot," he answered, thickly, as Speck caught a hold and helped to raise him to his feet. "I run hell-bent inta a cussed clothesline an' it throwed me so hard it liketa busted me in two. . . . Yuh—awright?"

"Yes—but the horses are gone."

"Let 'em go. It won't make no diff'rence," he surprised her by saying. "Either Hawkface comes or he don't an' we either whip Seal's bunch or we don't. All I got time to say now is—

"Why hello, there, yuh toad-specked ol' son-of-a-gun! What brung you projectin' aroun' out here?

"Comin' to think of it, yuh needn't answer. Just git this girl on a hawse an' take 'er to Black Rock."

"S'posin' she won't go?"

"Tie 'er on a hawse an' take 'er anyway. Take 'er to th' hotel an' put 'er to bed an' stand right outside 'er door till mornin'."

Evidently steadier now, Cliff stooped and recovered his hat, saying as he put it on and swung into saddle: "Yuh're the best friend I got in th' world, Speck. But, if yuh slip up on this an' anything happens to her, me'n' you will have a settlement when I git back to town."

He reined Red around and prompted him with his voice. In full stride at one bound, the big horse stormed around the corner of the house and pounded southward.

Speck started to follow—and didn't.

Lucile declared she wouldn't go to Black Rock—and did.

Having no orders, Wong climbed the orchard fence, crossed, keeping to the shadows, climbed the fence on the far side and made for the open prairie at the hitching trot inherited from his coolie ancestors.

CHAPTER XIII

FOG AND GUNSMOKE

CLIFF RUDD lay on watch at the southern extremity of the strip of cottonwoods that paralleled the Badlands. It was past three, and for two hours

he had been allowing Red to graze in the open, free of gear. There was work ahead, and he wanted the horse to be in the best condition possible.

South of where he lay, he knew that the herd was being held on the flat by the waterhole. Was Hawkface on the knoll beyond, ready to stop the drive? If he was, had he brought two men with him or a hundred? Would he adopt the right strategy? Would Seal's men scout him out before morning and drive southward at once, instead of waiting for day and entering the rough?

One thing Cliff knew definitely: Bill Seal must not be allowed to run at large through another day, no matter what else happened. The marshal was fully aware that no man can guard himself forever against an assassin who would not hesitate to strike from behind or from the dark. Sooner or later Seal would get him.

Worse still, sooner or later Seal would get Lucile Tucker, just as he had gotten her father, and her father's old crew of punchers. Cliff lay where he was instead of attempting to join Hawkface—if Hawkface was there at all—because Hawkface was acting primarily as an officer; Cliff was acting primarily as a lover; secondarily as a healthy young plainsman who had been personally reviled and challenged and defied.

The pale grey of the East lightened, shot through with shafts of lemon that changed gradually to glowing orange blended with rose and azure and shell-pink. When the waving tips of the cedars on the knoll caught the first rays of the sun that was peering over the dunes, Cliff whistled Red in and geared him, but left the cinches slack so that the horse could have the last possible moment of ease.

DAY rushed over the plain, driving the mists from the hillsides to the swales. Cliff leaped to his feet aquiver with eager excitement when sounds cut through the thinning mists on the plain to southward.

Here and there in that billowing fog a rope-end snapped promptingly and human voices sounded. Immediately the horns of close-packed cattle rattled and stiffened pastern joints crackled.

The drive was under way. Almost as well as if he were seeing it, Cliff could follow its course. The cattle had been held further to eastward than he had supposed. As they rumbled sluggishly westward toward the knoll he could hear the barking of the flankers who were pinching in the head of the herd, also the seductive "moo-oo-oo" of the point man who was to lead them into the big wash. Twice he grated his teeth when he heard Seal's bull voice, distant, but easily recognizable.

Then a vagrant prairie breeze swept the mists away, like a fleecy curtain being withdrawn. The broad rear of the drove showed; then its tapering sides, then the point. There was no hurry, no confusion, no sound or movement that might provoke a stampede. The half dozen men in the rear merely followed. The flankers eased in persistently but gradually, to get the drove strung out. As in all of Seal's operations, the discipline was perfect.

When the lead man was within a quarter of a mile of the knoll and was swerving to pass its northern rim, Cliff tightened the cinches, and brushed the dew from the lock and barrel of the rifle. He had sighted Seal well to southward, keeping to the higher ground where he could see best.

A minute more would tell the tale. If Hawkface was there, he would make his try; if he wasn't there, Cliff would rush and try to get Seal, single-handed.

The drove rolled on, blunted at the head for a moment when a line-backed steer tried to break herd, then came to a point again and flowed smoothly on.

His attention drawn to the rear, Cliff saw that the horse herd had been brought in behind the cattle, the home-bred horses following so obediently that but one rider was needed to watch them.

Cliff looked beyond the plodding horses and scowled. On a little rise by the waterhole, Seal was sitting his saddle in ease and confidence, one leg hooked over the horn, a thin wisp of white smoke spiraling up from his cigaret.

Then, Cliff felt his own body tense when the big rancher stiffened and snapped erect. His feet found the stirrups and he slid the saddlegun from its sheath in the skirts and sent the dun hurtling off the rise and scudding along the far side of the drove.

Still Cliff held his restive horse in. A glance to the front had shown that the point man had halted, the van of the herd commencing to pile up behind him. They were close to the knoll, now, and Cliff almost yelled with delight when, looking past them, he saw that Hawkface Gibbons had appeared almost in the path of the drive. He had a rifle hooked under his arm, and his thin voice carried across to Cliff:

"Hold 'er as is, an' stay put yurself, feller!"

Seemingly astonished past words or action, the point man remained speechless, motionless. But, back of him, a flanker swore torridly and raised the rifle he had been carrying across his lap. Before he could swing it around, the sheriff's piece jumped to a level and spat angrily, the slug blasting the outlaw out of saddle to dangle grotesquely by one stirrup as his mount whirled and bolted toward the waterhole.

The knoll and the plain leaped into noisy turmoil.

After firing the one shot, Hawkface had dropped back to the brush where his position became the center of a line of smoke puffs that told that no less than a half-dozen men were there with him. Roaring orders, his own rifle blaring, Seal rushed to the front; but, ever crafty, he circled the little lake to take advantage of the cover of the willows until he could get close in.

The point man was down now, and the flankers were obliged to divide their efforts, firing steadily at the smoke-ringed knoll while working frantically to keep the cattle in line.

No use! So far as the drive through the Badlands was concerned, Seal was defeated within a matter of seconds. For another half-dozen men on foot charged from the knoll, shooting, yelling, flapping slickers at the startled cattle. The point of the herd bent northward, stampeded bellowing, and the entire drove surged after them sucking in the flankers on their right side. The earth shook to the pound of their gouging hoofs as they charged between the rocks and the cottonwoods. Disregarding the futile efforts of their one drover, the horses whirled, big-eyed, snorting, and swung past the point of the timber within yards of where Cliff still sat his horse.

With the field clear of animals, both sides now reformed their lines. The men afoot by the knoll swarmed up it and dropped beside their fellows there. One of the last to start, a lean fellow in blue denim, collapsed half way up and rolled back, clawing feebly at the low-growing bushes—to be forgotten instantly by both sides when he came to rest on the flat.

A quick thinker, that man Seal! He had just left cover on the side of the lake next to the knoll when the drove broke. Apparently realizing the inevitability of the stampede, he made no effort to stem it. Also, with two of his men down and two others involved in the stampede, he had no support whatever within striking distance. He whirled the dun, bent low over the horn and spurred back to cover, unscathed by the storm of lead that horneted down from Hawkface's position. Within seconds he was in comparative safety on the east side of the willows, and bawling orders for his men to rally there.

CLIFF had deliberately refrained from taking part in the first phase of the struggle. Though his fingers had itched every time he caught sight of Seal, he had held his fire, waiting for the psychological

moment when his rifle might tip the balance.

He felt now, that his big moment had come. After tying his horses in a swale, and stringing his men along the fringe of willows, Seal had passed along the line giving orders that Cliff understood as well as if he had heard them. The bandits did no volleying. Instead, they fought individually, each man shifting his position quickly after firing. The result was that they were aiming at an enemy whose position was well marked, while the men on the knoll were practically searching a willow grove at random.

When Hawkface answered this strategy by keeping his men down—after his force had suffered two casualties—it commenced to look like a stalemate. Seal could not charge the hill without making a suicidal dash across an open flat; Hawkface could not take the lake position without suffering the same disadvantage.

The advantage, then, lay with Seal, in a way. He probably was the stronger, numerically. The drive was off, so the object now was to withdraw his force with as little loss as possible. There was nothing to prevent him from drawing matters out till nightfall, then retiring as he pleased.

But Cliff, in a perfect position to rake Seal's right flank, was an outside force neither commander had considered. He had a hand, and he played it. Dismounting and stepping fifty yards away from Red so that the horse would not be endangered, he commenced firing, coolly, calculatingly.

His first target, a bareheaded fellow he took to be the Swede, merely hunched lower when Cliff's first slug struck twenty feet before reaching him and ricocheted over his prone form. Having the range then, Cliff planted another bullet in the fellow's ribs, sending him rolling like a tenpin.

It was a startling development in the drawn battle, and its moral effect on both sides was much more important than the actual damage done.

Sensing a break in their favor, though they were unable to see what actually was taking place, the sheriff's men cheered loudly and redoubled their scathing fire. Forced now to concentrate in the willows out of sight from the cottonwoods, Seal's bandits became a compact mass, unable longer to shift position to evade return fire.

Again, Seal thought and acted quickly. Less than a minute after his men had been swallowed by the willows, they broke from them, racing for the swale where their horses had been tied. Seconds later, they were in saddle, scattering as they quirted their broncs southeastward in a dash to get out of range.

Such is mass morale. Men who a minute before constituted a cohesive fighting force now had but one purpose—to get away from that knoll. Fight still was in them—plenty of it. But their fighting would be the desperate, reckless slashing of a cornered cougar. Two of them left saddle and lay crumpled on the brown sod; a third ran a little way after his mount had been shot under him, then turned back, threw his rifle to the plain and stood like a statue, his hands held high.

Hawkface appeared content with what he had accomplished. After spattering lead after the fleeing ones in a desultory way, his men became inactive, and Cliff guessed that they had slid down on the far side of the knoll to get their horses.

Cliff himself was in no such frame of mind. Not once had he taken his eyes off Seal for more than a moment; and when he saw the dun horse beating almost due east through the washes, he mounted Red and broke from the cottonwoods with a rush. After going a quarter, a backward glance showed that he must stop Seal if anyone did. Not a man of the sheriff's force was in sight on the flat yet; to wait for them would mean that sight of the fleeing rancher would be lost. Knowing that the odds were so overwhelmingly against him that his course was nothing short of foolhardy,

Cliff set his teeth grimly, pointed Red's bobbing nose at the dun's heaving buttocks and kept it there. No matter how many others he would have to overcome first, he and Seal *must* come to grips.

And it developed that the very cunning that was Seal's chief asset offered Cliff his only chance at success. Evidently following instructions, the gang had pounded southeastward at first; after getting out of range, they had swerved gradually till they were going straight south, scattering as they scurried into the rough.

But, probably unknown to any of them, they were being abandoned by their tricky leader. Instead of swerving when the others did, he checked the dun a little till they had passed, then raced straight eastward till he disappeared between two big hills.

Perhaps a third of a mile back, Cliff bore straight for that gap for a little way, depressed by the thought that it had become a game of hide and seek in the hills. Then, a little calm reasoning caused him to check Red's speed slightly, and bear more northward.

He might be wrong; he might be right. He was banking upon the strongest possibility. His reasoning was that had Seal intended going south or southeast, he would have stuck with the others. To continue eastward would eventually bring him near Tumbleweed. It must be that he would swing north, passing between town and the Circle-Eight, and from there, anywhere that promised a hideout.

Then another thought chilled Cliff's blood. He wasn't certain that Lucile had followed his advice and left the ranch. Perhaps Seal was headed for there. The mere suspicion of such a thing caused him to swerve left a little more in order to cut across the arc of the circle in which he imagined Seal to be traveling.

After a mile of floundering among shifting sand, Cliff headed toward a big conical dune ahead, and to his right. Reaching it he reined in and scrambled to the crest afoot. Asweat with anxiety, he remained there for several minutes, sure that from that elevation he would see Seal whip over a knoll or hill somewhere, sooner or later.

And precisely that occurred. His searching eyes caught sight of the racing dun breasting a low ridge a half mile away, and more to northward than eastward. Just as he saw Seal, the rancher saw him and waved a long arm in a taunting gesture of farewell.

Sliding off the dune in an avalanche of loose sand, Cliff swung up and gave Red his head, bearing straight northward on the theory that Seal must swing west to avoid the town.

Ten minutes later, after splashing through a curve of Badger Creek, Cliff sighted his quarry again, now not more than a thousand yards distant and directly ahead. He patted Red's sweat-beaded neck. "Come on, ol' boy! It's up to you to show 'em some runnin' that *is* runnin'!"

CHAPTER XIV

MAN TO MAN

SUNSHINE lay warm on the dun buffalo sod west of the Circle-Eight ranch-house and on the clump of crumbling sandstone boulders that marked the beginning of the rough to northward. Emerging from among those boulders, a diminutive Chinese in rumpled white pajamas blinked his olive eyes questioningly at the distant ranch-house, then started mincing toward it, still holding in one hand the heavy six he had kept within reach thorughout the night.

His one experience during the fight at the house had taught Wong that he couldn't handle the pistol with any effect; but it comforted him somehow to know that he had it.

Wong's "li'l Missee" was in trouble, and had left the place. Perhaps she had returned, perhaps not. Wong didn't know, but he must find out, though he was hor-

ribly afraid, on his own account. He had taken a dozen steps away from the boulders when he suddenly turned and scuttled back to them, trembling from his cued pate to his slippered toes.

Beating directly toward the ranch-house, he had seen a lathering dun horse whose rider was lashing and spurring him mercilessly. A furlong back, but nearer the house in a direct line, someone on a reeking bay was cutting in to shunt the dun away. Wong emitted a low ratlike squeal of terror and ducked back among the rocks when he reached a conclusion and made a discovery, simultaneously.

The conclusion was that the man on the bay was succeeding in his attempt to head the other away from the house; the discovery was that the man on the dun was Bill Seal, whom Wong feared even more than he did the intangible evil spirits his ancestors had taught him to avoid.

And now Wong's trembling gave place to a rigor of terror. Balked in his attempt to reach the house, Seal was bearing toward the little rocky cluster where Wong lay. He was coming on fast, and in his hands was gripped a heavy rifle the sight of which broke Wong's rigor and set him to shuddering again.

The cornered rat! The turning worm! Gripping the butt in both trembling hands, Wong poked the muzzle of the six over the boulder, closed his fear-strained eyes and yanked the trigger three times in quick succession. Losing his grip on the butt at the kick of the third explosion, he tucked his head down and lay still, muttering a prayer to the favorite gods of his tong.

Wong lay thus for a long time. When he raised his head fearfully to con the plain, he dutifully whispered a prayer of thanks to those same gods for delivering him. For the dun and the bay were two distant specks to the northeast, and neither of them was headed toward the boulders.

Wong's gratitude to the friendly gods was prompted in part by the knowledge that the monster Seal would have paid no attention to the barking gun, had he known Wong held it.

Just then, Cliff Rudd was bracing for the fight that he knew was but a matter of minutes. Seal was in the open now, having been blasted away from the boulders just in time to keep him from taking refuge there with full command of the situation.

And good though he was, the lathering dun now was running only on his courage, threshing doggedly through the low growing bushes instead of avoiding them or taking them in his stride. A furlong back, but still running cleanly, strongly, Red steadily ate up the gap between them.

Seal glanced back for the hundredth time during that hour of tension. Then he wrenched the dun to a sliding stop, threw his big body off on the far side, while Cliff matched the maneuver, within the same second.

The two rifles barked. The dun reared high, his forelegs threshing wildly. He thudded broadside on the sward, lay still —a fleshy bulwark for the master who had thrown himself prone behind him.

Recovering quickly from the fall, Seal peeked over the withers of the dead horse and the muzzle of his rifle advanced like the questing head of a snake.

But, meanwhile, Cliff had moved, and quickly. A little to his right was a lone prairie dog hole, opening from the mound of dirt dug from it. He threw his body behind the little mound, then raised his voice and called:

"Hey, Seal!"

"What th' hell yuh want?"

"Yesterday at Tumbleweed yuh stuck yur dam chest out an' opined that it was too bad we was shootin' at paper with our sixes 'stead of at each other.

"Lay that rifle down, yuh big four-flusher an' stand up like a man! Then start a walkin', an' I'll start a walkin'! When yuh think yuh're in sixgun range, crack down an' do yur do!"

WHEN the other remained silent, Cliff taunted him further. "Yuh was makin' a gran'stand play before a girl yesterday, wasn't yuh, yuh thick-lipped dry gulcher!

"But they ain't nobody aroun' here now but me an' yuh, and yuh gotta mushy neck, eh?"

Silence again for a little time, then Seal said: "Throw yur long smokepole down first, an' step out."

Cliff laughed derisively. "An' let yuh drill me from where yuh lay, eh?"

"Well, how do I know yu' won't drill me?"

"'Cause I'm a man an' yuh're just a slimy snake, Seal, so low that yuh'd hafta look up to see another snake's belly in plowed ground.

"Besides that, yuh're so yaller yur sweat 'ud make good barn paint. Summin' up, yuh're so low an' yaller yuh git a gang back of yuh an' fight a girl at night, yuh dewlappin', rabbit-livered, lizard-eyed drygulchin'—"

At the second reference to the girl, Seal had reared erect with a roar of anger, throwing his rifle high and far. Stepping over the body of his horse, he came on at long, stamping strides, head bent low, elbows out, hooked fingers hovering about the butts of his sixes.

Cliff rose also, hitched his belt carelessly, strolled indolently forward, his arms swinging naturally—but with one hand or the other ever passing a hip.

A hundred yards separated them—seventy-five—fifty. "Better go-git 'em 'fore them crooked fingers gits too stiff," Cliff taunted.

Forty-five yards — forty — thirty, with Seal covering two feet to Cliff's one, heavy jaw outthrust, pale eyes glinting with fury.

Twenty yards—eighteen—

The big rancher's forearms became invisible as the spokes of a rapidly revolving wheel, and his guns leaped up and roared, right—left—right.

But another shot had blended in with the report of the first one. The second had flared straight up. The third had broken sod by the toe of Seal's own left boot.

He swayed, knees buckling, one hand trying to raise its pistol again, the other releasing its gun and clawing feebly at his massive chest as though to remove some obstruction there.

The fiery hatred in the pale eyes dimmed and the curse on the thick lips subsided to a low mumble. Folding joint after joint, he sank in a sweatsodden heap and lay still, the pistol still grasped tightly in the stiffening fingers.

Holstering his smoking six Cliff strode close to stare down at his fallen enemy. "After all, there was a clean fight in yuh, feller," he admitted chivalrously, "though it did take a lotta cussin' to bring it out.

"Mebbe there was a grain of good in yuh, too—if somebody only coulda uncovered it."

That was the only funeral oration uttered over the remains of Bill Seal.

BLACK ROCK was slumbering in her noon-day lethargy when Cliff slid out of saddle before the hotel and clumped inside, oblivious to the curious eyes fastened on him by townsmen on the walks.

The old landlord was dozing in his arm chair with his enormous carpet slippers heaved to the window-sill. He awoke with a jerk and favored the marshal with a toothless grin when he entered. He rose stiffly and jerked his head toward the door marked "PARLOR" behind which Cliff could hear a low hum of voices. When he opened the door, he saw that Speck was more than fulfilling his instructions.

In a rocker by the window, sat Lucile, wan looking, but quite evidently sound in limb and body. In other chairs ranged against the wall sat Mayor Cook and Doc Livingston with shotguns close at hand. Speck was standing with his back to the door, but he whirled to meet Cliff when the girl came out of her chair with a glad cry and fairly threw herself on him.

"Well-well," the mayor sputtered, rubbing his white palms together delightedly. "Glad to see you, Rudd, I'm sure."

Doc came forward with a practical question: "How'd everything come out, anyway?"

"Hunky-dory," Cliff answered, looking at the girl only. "The stock is on its home range, an' Seal never will bother nobody, no more."

She smiled up at him from the hollow of his shoulder. "I'm glad about the stock, of course; but you look pale and your voice isn't strong. You're not hurt, are you?"

Cliff shook his head in negative, but sank into the chair toward which she and Speck steered him. "I ain't even scratched nowheres," he assured her, "but I'm admittin' that I don't feel just what a feller might call plumb oaty.

"Yuh see, I didn't feel like eatin' yesterday noon, an' I expected to git late supper here in Black Rock last night, but didn't. I was too busy to hunt for chuck this mornin', an' I ain't had no dinner yet.

"If I could git a little coffee—say four-five cups—as a starter while somebody was cookin' a two-pound steak an' some aigs—"

"Surely." She turned toward the door. "I'll cook it for you, myself. After all you've done for me, I feel that I ought to cook for you for the rest of your life."

"It's a bet!" Cliff shouted so enthusiastically that she knew his interpretation of her words.

"All right," she said, brazenly. "Have it your own way, if you like, Mister Smarty."

Her cheeks burning, she started for the door, but the mayor held up a fat hand and spoke in a worried tone:

"It being my understanding that you and Rudd are to be—er—married soon, I am prompted to ask if you will—ah—arrange to live in town, or on the ranch."

"On the ranch, of course," she answered.

"Yeh," Cliff seconded. "I got some money an' some cows, an' she's got th' range an' water an' some more cows an' hawses. We'll git along."

The mayor looked nonplussed. Then he brightened perceptibly. "I was wondering what we would do for a marshal; but I see now that we will be all right. Mr.—ah—Speck, there, has earned a promotion, so—"

"I'm declinin' the nomination," Speck cut in, grinning. "I'm a borned cowman, an' I understand that th' bunch out at the Circle-Eight is a congregation of spavined has-beens an' mealy-mouthed will-bes. I want th' job of hirin' an' firin' till yuh gotta real crew.

"All that's in favor of me bein' foreman of that outfit, say aye; them that's opposed jump off th' earth."

"It's carried unanymous, yuh grinnin' toad-frawg," Cliff ruled. Now git outa th' way an' let her go stir up my chuck or I'll—"

"Gittin'," Speck said, his grin spreading till it threatened to engulf his sun-cooked ears. "I've heared vague rumors that they's a preacher feller somewheres in this town. I'll go round th' cuss up an' prod 'im in here while yuh're eatin'!"

AFTER the blushing girl had gone one way and the grinning Speck another, Cliff turned to the somber-faced mayor. "Needn't look so off yur feed, Mister Mayor. The town here won't make yuh no more trouble; an' fore I quit my job, me an' Speck is gonna help Hawkface Gibbons chase them Badlanders so far an' so fast their buzzin' shirt-tails 'll ravel out clean up to their collars.

"'Sides that, me an' Speck 'll always be around if you need us."

"You said something, that time," Doc smiled, reaching his black felt hat off the table and clapping it on at its customary diagonal. "Come on, Cook. In our official capacities we'll go lock the damn town up tight and rally every citizen down here.

"This is going to be one wedding that Black Rock isn't going to forget during this generation."

In front of the bank a bunch of masked riders milled—the Padres! Tip and Lance came charging down the street, colts roaring. Lance lurched crazily to the left and crashed to one knee as lead plowed through his forearm.

The Gun-Medico from Hell's Corners

SMASHING NEW NOVEL OF THE RENEGADE-RULED BORDER

by ED. EARL REPP

It takes fine courage to face the guns of a man sworn to kill you—but how much greater courage it took Doc Tip Wycoff to wage his one-man war against the law which would ruin him and the owlhooters who would dry-gulch him—and still with the shadow of the jail of his past or Boot-Hill Hell before him, keep on fighting!

CHAPTER I
THE HELL'S CORNERS LAW DOG

WHEN the train slid from the station platform and left him behind, young Dr. Tipton Wycoff's smoky blue eyes ran the length of Mogollon's main street. False fronts and wooden awnings formed an almost unbroken canopy from one end to the other. The clang of the blacksmith's anvil beat up in metallic waves. Hitchracks were filled. Cowtown smells stung Tip's nostrils and set up a longing within him. It had been eight years since he had looked upon such a town as this. A slow smile built on his fine lips as he reflected: "A new town . . . a new start in life. I'll make it go!"

He started toward the hotel, conscious of the citizens strolling past. Their glances brushed him with interest, but without recognition. He didn't expect anyone here to know him. Mogollon was a long way from Hell's Corners.

His quick eyes picked up the figure in front of the law office as the lawman hitched forward in his chair and eyed him appraisingly. And as Tip drew closer to the tin-star, a shock rocked him. But he did not alter his stride. He swore softly. Of all the towns in New Mexico to choose from, he had picked the headquarters for Sheriff Lance Madden, the one lawman who was sure to remember him.

Keeping his direction, his lips a thin line, Tip saw Madden take a parallel course toward him. The lawdog's jaw jutted resolutely, but Tip told himself he had nothing to fear, or hide, now. Shoulders squared, he turned into the hotel and braced the bespectacled clerk on duty at the counter.

"Where can I find office and living quarters combined?" he asked.

The slender clerk's mouth sagged open, closed with a click as the rotund form of the lawman darkened the portal. He had caught his signal for silence. The sheriff came to Tip's shoulder. "Mebbyso I can steer you right," he said heavily.

The blunt, aggressive way of Sheriff Lance Madden was still the same. The heavy emphasis of the man had not changed. Yet, Lance was different. His usual certainty was lacking and worry had deepened the weather-seams of his sun-darkened face. Tip faced him squarely. "I'd be obliged," he murmured.

For a second their dueling eyes were rapiers of steel, thrusting but unable to penetrate each other's guard. Tip knew Lance was waiting for him to present his broad back and lead the way from the

lobby. That was typical of the sheriff's training. Outlaws always walked first. A slow grin thinned the youngster's lips. He reached out and linked his arm in Lance's and propelled him to the door. He felt the quivering of the lawman's muscles, but Lance did not pull away. The medico's grin deepened.

"Which way?" he asked as they hit the walk.

Lance nodded his head up street. Keeping his firm grip on the lawman's arm, Tip whirled and strode in that direction. He made the shorter sheriff adopt his long stride. Lance's bandy legs churned the boardwalk to keep up.

He puffed: "Eight years is a long time."

EXPECTING that statement, Tip answered readily. "Your memory and eyes are still good."

"A box coat, top hat an' black satchel don't hide nothin'. You should have grown a beard."

"Tried it," said Tip drily. "Makes my face feel dirty."

"So it's medicine now," stated the lawman. "Pay better'n murder an' rustlin'?"

The smoky blue of Tip's eyes turned to burning violet. "Having only tried one of the two," he said, his voice rough edged, "I couldn't say. I just graduated from school. But anything'll pay better than either of those two."

Agitation barbed the sheriff's tone. "Or act as a blind for it—one."

The accusation opened a wound within Tip he had been trying to heal for eight years. "Let sleeping dogs lie," he gritted.

The lawman pivoted in front of an empty store. It was an obvious attempt at showing the youngster he could be forceful and take the play too. The movement was so violent, they almost bumped chests. "In my business," intoned the lawman drily, "I keep my eye on the ones pretending sleep."

"In my business," repeated Tip heavily, "it's a sign the patient's resting easy."

Lance shrugged, refusing the philosophy. "A kioat's always a kioat," he said flatly.

"I've seen 'em tame enough to eat out of a hand," Tip shot back relentlessly. "Howcome you're in Mogollon?"

"Brought in from Hell's Corners to clean up the Padre Gang. *Who are they, Wycoff?*"

The question was blunt and seemingly pulled from the air. If Manden planned on surprise or a change in the rugged passiveness of Tip's face, he was disappointed. The young medico's level gaze did not change. "Never heard of the gents," he answered evenly.

"Damn you, Wycoff!" exploded the sheriff. "If I thought you were teamed with them that's devilin' Sun Strike Valley . . . If I thought yore little black bag was a blind . . .!"

"You're thinkin' too much!" interrupted Tip quietly. "I prescribe more action an' less sitting in yonder chair. Readin' sign is the way to corner outlaws."

"Sign!" echoed Lance bitterly. "I've followed sign until the leather wore the seat outa my britches. An' all of 'em point to the same place. Nowhere! Four men have died in two months because they found out somethin'. Every rancher in the valley's losin' beef. Jock Manners, owner of the Broken Q, is the only one who ain't on my neck. The reason he hasn't squawked is because he's havin' fall roundup now. When he tallies up, he'll raise hell. An' now you show up!"

"I've nothing to hide an' no cause for worry," stated Tip crisply. "My debt is paid. I pleaded guilty to killin' that border tinhorn. I did a year for manslaughter. Six months more for runnin' wet cattle. At twenty a kid's pretty reckless. I'm twenty-nine now an' see things different. I've nothing to be ashamed of."

"Mebby not," gruffed the lawman. A cunning light crept into his watery eyes. "But Sun Strike might not take kindly to

buyin' medicine off an ex-jailbird. Mebby-so they wouldn't put trust an' confidence in him."

Tip felt squeezed by Lance's words—just like the day his carefree life had been taken from him by prison bars. "You wouldn't tell 'em, would you?" he gasped.

"On one condition," grinned Lance unctuously.

Tip's flesh crawled. The desperation of this lawman was a startling thing. And he meant to hold the mailed fist of gossip over the youngster's head; that malignant talk which so quickly ruins a professional man. Tip cursed his luck. This lawman was the only man north of the international boundary line who would remember his past. Again that bitter thought that he had picked the one town in all New Mexico in which he could not be free surged through him. He knew this manhunting game well. Sheriffs fought tricky outlaws with chicanery. Was he to be used as bait to satisfy this lawman's reputation of being the best bounty hunter in the state? He had spent his last dollar getting to Mogollon. He could go no farther. He said softly: "What's on your mind, Lance?"

The sheriff accepted his question as subservient. In his lawman-trained heart, Lance believed the old adage—no honor among thieves. "Just this," he intoned. "Stale beer draws flies. Doctorin' this range will let you in on a lot uh stuff I'd be months findin' out. When you hear somethin' I'd be interested in . . . you'll tell me!"

Tip's face paled. "Ethics," he gritted, "won't permit that. A doctor respects the confidences of his clients."

Lance shrugged with a carelessness that was a threat. "Doctors do," he said sarcastically. "Jailbirds don't!"

"I'm a doctor!" interjected Tip hotly.

"An ex-outlaw to me," went on the sheriff. "I brought my picture gallery with me, Wycoff. Your prison pictures are in it. Reprints, in the form of a handbill passed from store to store an' nailed on the bulletin board, wouldn't do your practice any good."

Starch flowed from Tip's body. "You wouldn't dare!" he charged.

The sheriff's thick lips compressed and his palms brushed against the twin guns holstered on his bulging thighs. "When it comes to gettin' justice, I'd do anything," he said heavily. "Think it over, Wycoff. I'll keep an eye on you an' listen to what you have to tell off an' on."

Then he was spinning away, crossing the dusty street to the chair tilted against the office wall. He sat down, drew a cigar from his plaid shirt pocket and thumbed alight a match. He kept his eyes from the rigid doctor.

TIP writhed in the grip of uncertainty. Absently, his lean hand dug into his pockets to jingle the two small coins there—his last. The road wound from the end of the street out across the undulating valley floor, a wide strip of grey against the brown of the sage. He could take it afoot and go on to new destinies. He could stay here and clash wills with Sheriff Lance Manden. No desire to leave this valley, hemmed by the towering Tularosas and the Datil Range, swayed him. He had come here to practice because of his memory of the country when he had ridden the back trails. He loved Sun Strike Valley the first time he had seen it.

Slowly, a grim resolve strengthened the fibres of his body that had been loosened by the sheriff's threats. He would stay! Lance Manden needed doctoring as well as other people. He was getting old and his mind was sick . . . or he wouldn't ask a man who wanted to go straight to turn stool pigeon. Tip admired Lance for the code the oldster championed. It bothered the youngster not at all to remember Lance had caught and convicted him. Tip had been wrong and admitted it. Manden had done his duty. This Padre Gang he spoke of had him desperate. A slip now and Lance would be shucked into the discard of the aged.

And Tip knew, too, that if he moved on now, Lance, in his present vindictive mood, would send news ahead and forever keep him on the move.

The youngster grinned wryly at his luck. "There's only one way to get honey from a beehive," he murmured half aloud. "That's to take your chances of gettin' stung. I'm stickin', Mister Sheriff-man!—to my own business an' ethics!"

CHAPTER II
LET HIM DIE

TIP hung out his shingle on the office selected by Sheriff Lance Manden. He could sit before his dust stained window, reading a medical book, and catch the lawman's eyes upon him. For Lance's office was just across the street and down one building. It amused Tip to be under such close surveillance.

Yet, he understood the raw nerves of the sheriff. Tension hung like a pall over Sun Strike Valley. Two more punchers had died under the Padre's guns. This mysterious gang sprayed the nights with fear, and every clump of brush during the day was a potential bushwacker's covert.

Like the good doctor, Tip put his hand on the pulse of gossip. Knowing the outlaw side of the game, he became more and more convinced that this killing and rustling was an inside job with a diabolical plot behind all this murder. These Padres were playing for big stakes. The mere theft of cattle was but a blind. These men who died were all small ranchers, their homesteads reverting back to free range at their death. Not being directly concerned in this battle, Tip sat back like the checker kibitzer and saw the moves Sheriff Lance Manden should make. But Lance would be too bullheaded to take advice or listen to reason from one he strongly suspected as being the inside worker of the gang. The lawdog's ceaseless watching of Tip's office was laughable. He would find nothing here. He was wasting his time.

And this day, with the shadows coming down layer on layer from the Tularosas, Tip closed his book with a snap and solemnly contemplated his business. In one week he had treated three cases of colic, splinted a crushed finger for the blacksmith, and given the ailing wife of the mercantile owner some kidney pills. That wasn't enough to pay his rent.

Slow anger crept over him as he realized that Sheriff Lance Manden had given out orders to let the new medico strictly alone pending his investigations. The lawman had convinced himself that Tip was connected with the Padres and would take his own ruthless time to prove it. This range was sicker than the people on it. And Tip realized his only way to a good practice was to cure the malignant cancer eating at Sun Strike Valley's vitals first. Lance was doing nothing to find out if this ex-outlaw was going straight. He was hopelessly lost in the cleverness of the Padres. Tip pondered here in the gloom. He was tired of this stubbornness exhibited by the lawman. If he was to stay in Sun Strike he'd have to prove his sincerity.

Now the soft opening and closing of the rear door drew his attention. He almost leaped from his chair at the sight of the man standing there. His florid face was twitching and his beady eyes had that dead look—telltale of a drug user. His shoulders and slender arms kept moving and tugged the cords of his neck into rope-like sinews. He pushed a sinister impression in front of him.

"What do you want?" demanded Tip.

"I got money," grated the man. "Plenty uh money. Marihuana's run out. Figgered you might have cocaine." It was more of an order than a guess.

Cold sweat bathed Tip. "I don't sell it," he answered.

"By God, you will!" threatened the addict.

Anger crept into Tip's arms and made his fists ball. Then he smothered his emotions. This man was obviously a Padre killer. By twisting his words he might be able to get a line on this gang. "I'll give you some on one condition," he said.

The man's lips twitched. "That is—?"

"If you'll tell me how you got started on this!"

The man's eyes remained dead-pale as he came closer. It was a shock to Tip that this person he had judged in the gloom to be a man was no more than a boy, twenty.

His skin was like yellow parchment scratched by deep lines. That gave him an older look. He was beyond cure. Pity touched Tip. It would be merciful to administer to this crumpled life.

He took out his vials when the youngster didn't answer, mixed up a portion in his needle and handed it to the boy. The shaky, hungry way the youth snatched it sent a pang through Tip. A terrible hate built within him for the man or men who had started this youngster on the road to hell. To Tip the people who had done this were the most despicable human beings the devil had ever spawned.

AS THE effect of the drug took hold of the youngster, his shoulders squared and color flooded his face.

"You were going to tell me . . .," began Tip.

"Was I?" mocked the youngster cunningly. He possessed the suspicious nature of all drug users. "How do I know you'll keep it to yoreself?"

"I'm a doctor," stated Tip evenly. "I respect confidences." He grinned at the wary youngster.

Something in Tip's manner, his soft understanding or sincerity, stirred the boy. He scrubbed his steady hand across his forehead. "There ain't much to tell," he muttered with a catch in his voice. "I thought I was smart when they showed me how to use it. Me an' dad always fought, so I didn't get any help there because I couldn't go to him. Sis tried to stop me . . . but I wouldn't listen to a girl." His expressionless eyes leveled on Tip. "I started out all wrong."

The young doctor laid a hand on the youngster's shoulder. "I understand," he murmured. "So did I. But a year and six months in prison taught me right from wrong. It's not too late yet."

"It is," harsh bitterness curled the youngster's lips. "I ran off an' tried to quit. I suffered the tortures uh hell. I might uh made it . . . but they found me."

"Who?" asked Tip softly, excitement rioting his blood.

Before the youngster could answer, heavy bootsteps hit the boardwalk. The front door of the office squeaked open and Sheriff Manden's heavy tones asked: "Why all the darkness? Whose hoss is that out back?"

"Damn you!" hissed the youngster at Tip. "Yo're teamed with that heller!"

Before denial could come to his lips, the youngster whirled toward the back door. Tip reached for him, but the drug-powered youngster twisted free and ran out the back.

True to his lawing instincts, the lawman swore and triggered the gloom. Purple flashes lit the darkness and lead screamed perilously close to Tip. The bullets thudded into the rear walls. The door slammed shut and the pound of flying hoofs beat back. The boy was gone. Lance meant to ask questions after shooting.

"Hold it!" commanded Tip, and thumbed a match to the lamp.

Lance scowlingly awaited the full guttering of the light. The awful force of his blunt nature was bent upon Tip. The smoking guns in his hands were steady and menacing. Accusation was a thing alive in his eyes.

"I said stale beer would draw flies," he ground out. "Who was it?"

Tip was angered by the lawman's overbearance. "I don't know!" he said hotly.

"You lie!" charged the lawman. "It's no use, Tip. Come clean an' I'll see you get off light. Don't try to hide the Padres."

The young medico went rigid, his hands spread on the desk and he leaned toward the lawman. "Like I said before," he gritted, "I've nothing to hide. Who it was I don't know. I've never seen the fella before in my life!"

Lance's teeth ground together. Desperation brought sweat to his forehead. "There's ways uh breakin' men like you," he stepped threateningly forward.

Tip didn't give an inch. With his nose less than two inches from that of the sheriff's, he barked: "Old stuff, Lance, an' something to practice on yella kids an' broken old men. I'm not telling you nothing!"

A grim smirk came to the lawman's lips. "No-o-o?" he strung the word out harshly. Then in a lightning-like movement, he brought the barrel of his left gun down smartly on Tip's splayed fingers.

A flood of crimson color suffused Tip's face. His teeth clamped tight against the cry that welled to his throat. He gulped away the pain and batted his eyes to keep the tears back which sprang from the sting running the length of his arm. His muscles trembled with anger.

"You're slippin'!" he choked hatefully. "When a lawman's got to go back to musclin' a fella — he's through. Lance, your brain's diseased. These Padres got you against the blank wall and you won't admit it. You'll be strikin' a woman next tryin' to get gossip from her!"

Lance's upraised gun, ready to strike, quivered down. Tip's words had brought a haggard look into his countenance, but his face lost none of its sternness. "All right, Kid," he gruffed. "You win this time. Pack your stuff an' come with me."

"Where?"

"I'm eliminatin' you," said the lawman heavily. He glanced at his timepiece. "A train comes through at ten o'clock. I'll see you on it. You're leavin' Sun Strike!"

TIP'S mouth gaped open, closed with a click as the sounds of drumming hoofs beat onto the street. Intently, they listened. Cursing and sweating, the driver tooled his creaking rig up to the office and sawed on the reins. Tensely, they waited. The door burst open and a warped oldster plunged in, his arms laden with a body. He reeled to the desk under the strain.

"Jock Manners of the Broken Q!" swore the sheriff and helped lower the ranch owner.

The tension was snapped between doctor and lawman. Tip took charge. "In here!" he ordered and led the way to his sheet-covered table.

Stretching the grey-headed oldster out, the youngster's hands flew. He slit Manners' shirt and found the ugly bullet wound in his back. Wiping his hands on a towel, he tested the Broken Q owner's reflexes. Examination told him that the slug was lodged perilously close to the main nerve center near the base of the spine. It called for a delicate operation and success could not be foretold. Grimly, Tip shook his head.

"One chance in a thousand," he muttered.

A gutteral whisper from the wounded man shocked them to silence. "Damn 'em! Gotta tell Lance . . ." His voice tailed off in a groan.

The lawman's lips were white-edged and he grabbed Tip's arm hard. "You've gotta make that one chance good!" he swore harshly. "Jock knows somethin'. If you bungle . . . I'll kill yuh!"

That violent burning set up in Tip's eyes. "You've gone completely off your nut!" he gritted. "God's the one who says whether this man lives or not. I can only do my best."

The weary haggardness came over Lance's face. "Mebby I am a little jumpy," he grated. "There's only one way out for me . . . an' that's trust an ex-outlaw. Go to it!"

Tip nodded, but the grimness did not

leave his face. "If this man's got any kin, better get 'em in here," he said.

"Where'd yuh find 'im, Mitch?" the lawman asked the oldster.

"Out by the forks," mouthed the oldster. "Looked tuh me like Jock left his crew in the hills an' come straight tuh town. His hoss was shot from under 'im."

The sheriff nodded. "I'll go out for a look-see. You ride to the Broken Q."

They stomped from the office.

As Tip busied gathering his instruments, he studied that pale and drawn face. Even in its lax, unconscious state, the countenance showed the rugged disposition of its owner. Jock Manners would be a hard man to get along with. The cut of his lips was a bit cruel. The mold of his chin showed force and told that he was a man unforgiving when denied his way. He was typical of the strong men who fashion power out of such exacting country as Sun Strike Valley.

Tip was just bending over Manners when the unearthly quiet of the room was broken by a voice.

"Let him die!"

CHAPTER III
ETHICAL DECISION

TIP'S head came up from his work as if he was punched with an uppercut. His eyes fastened on the window through which the voice had come. There was nothing to be seen. Cold sweat made his body feel clammy. With one quick motion, he extinguished the lamp, stood immobile in the inky darkness. Tensely, he waited. The ticking watch in his pocket was the only sound.

Then something scraped along the wall outside. Again that hollow voice permeated the walls. "If he don't die . . . you're next!" Then the drum of hoofs. The man was gone.

Tip's hand shook a little as he scrubbed it across his forehead. He knew the voice of the murderous Padres had spoken. He swore softly. This latest ultimatum put him between two fires. If Jock Manners didn't die, the outlaws of Sun Strike would seek his life. If Jock did die . . . he would have to answer to Sheriff Manden. Kill or get killed—one.

Indecision did not sway him. His duty was clear. According to his ethics, he was bound to do all he could to alleviate suffering. His hand was steady again when he relit the lamp and sent its pale light washing over the still owner of the Broken Q.

He was poised over the jagged wound when a buckboard stopped out front. A girl burst into the office. Her blonde hair tumbled about her face and neck in wild disorder, whipped by the wind. In her haste, she had left the sleeves of her gingham dress unbuttoned and her white arms were bared to the shoulders as the cloth drooped. Her face was flushed with unnatural colors because of her grief, but even that failed to hide the natural vitalness of her. Her brown eyes were wet with unshed tears and her lips creased into thin lines. She was as commanding as her father and showed his force of character in the contours of her firm chin and slightly flared nose.

"He's . . .?" she gasped.

"Still alive," said Tip as gently as he could.

A pang touched him as the girl ran to her father's side and stroked his brow with fingers that trembled. Tip lowered his head as the tears slid uncontrolled down her cheeks. When he looked up again, her eyes were dry and she had mastered her emotions. "I'll help," she said in a small voice.

Admiration for her swept through Tip. She was strong and he could tell she fought to steel herself against all this. "Perhaps you'd better go to the hotel until I'm finished," he suggested.

She shook her head in firm negation. "I've stood other things worse than this," she murmured. "What shall I do?"

Tip wondered what she meant by that,

for he witnessed the fresh grief clouding her eyes. "Warm water," he said tersely, and promptly forgot everything but the task in hand.

He marveled at the steadiness of the girl's hands as she helped him. She anticipated some of his moves and was ready with instruments before he could call for them. And when the delicate operation was over, the pressure relieved from the man's nerve center, he straightened.

"You'd make me a good nurse," he said. And he knew he had been subconsciously thinking that throughout his chore. Or was it just that he had thought? He couldn't catalogue the suddenness of this new and strange emotion flooding him.

"I've seen and done plenty in this valley," returned the girl, "by necessity. Perhaps I'll need a job if . . . if . . ." Her hands flew to her face and she swayed against the wall. With the crisis over, she broke down completely. It makes a great difference when it is one of your own kin.

Tip gently helped her into a chair, and handed her a glass of water. "The worst is over," he soothed. "We haven't control over what happens now. We've done our best."

Taking a firm grip on herself, Leah Manners nodded. "I'm very grateful to you," she murmured fervently. "Dad's been a fighter all his life and it hurts to see him so helpless. What chance has he?"

Tip shrugged, remembering that terse voice in the night who called for his death. "Closely watched," he murmured, "he might make it. But I really can't tell. Not for three or four days. The shock has been terrific. You had better get some sleep now."

She shook her head. "I'm not leaving," she said. "Our family's been battling among ourselves too long. Perhaps this will make us see the light. If only Dave would come!"

"Dave?"

"My brother. He and father never did get along. Dad thought Dave should be stronger than he was and would never excuse his weaknesses. I don't know what's gotten into him lately. He's been nervous, irritable and away from the house a lot. Dave and I fought over his choice of friends, punchers on our ranch. But he won't listen to me. He acts so queerly. One moment he's kind and gentle, the next mean and ugly."

Tip heard her out, her words making his body rigid. Her description of her brother was that of the youngster who had come into the office but hours before, a craven, groveling slave to drugs. Terrible depression settled on Tip's shoulders. He found himself wishing he was not a doctor now, the clearing house for everyone's troubles. This situation was sordid and one such a lovely girl should not be subjected to. Leah Manners had a delicate sense of emotion and finding out her brother was an addict would bury her in grief. That thought jerked on Tip's heartstrings. If there was only some way to save her this double sorrow, he resolved to do it.

They sat in silence looking at each other. Without a word, Tip pulled a blanket from his bed and draped it about her shoulders. She snuggled it around her and thanked him with her eyes. Her grief-softened face stirred him strangely and he was conscious of that gnawing hunger within him again. He gritted his teeth. This couldn't be . . . for three reasons. He was an ex-outlaw and Sheriff Lance Manden wouldn't let him forget it. The Padres had made their threat now. And he knew of her brother. Dave Manners was one of the gang. Lance would give his right arm to know what Tip knew now. And this young doctor had come to Sun Strike to practice. The whole valley was sick . . . and lead poison was the only cure.

TO keep from violating his code of ethics and the secrets of his patients, Tip had only one recourse — guns. What Lance

Manden had said was true. Tip would learn more about the valley's mystery in a few days than he had been able to glean in months. But for Tip to take to guns would be to build a barrier against life for him. Not a lawman, he would be forced to seek out the Padres, one by one, and kill them. He would be damning himself to the hoot-owl trail again—the path he had spent eight years of hard study in escaping.

But seeing this girl thus, added to the turmoil within Tip. He had nothing to gain by inactivity except more of Sheriff Manden's wrath. He had everything to lose by carrying the fire to the Padres. Caught in the mesh of these thoughts, he stared long and hard at the girl who had now fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion and strain. And he knew he loved her. This hunger within him would not be denied. It had happened quickly for they had only been together two hours now. But Tip knew life was like that, had learned that life was swift and turbulent during his short days on the owl-hoot and the long, tedious days studying medicine. With the fatalism inbred in range men, he knew you were here today and gone tomorrow. He could understand this speed with which his lonely soul had reacted to the loveliness of Leah Manners.

And now he held up his hand for quiet as Sheriff Lance Manden stomped heavily into the office. At the sight of the sleeping girl, the lawman lightened his tread.

"How's he doin'?" he asked wearily.

Tip shrugged. "Won't be able to tell for about four days. He's had one hell of a shock. If he comes out of it at all . . . you might find something out."

Lance sank heavily into a chair. "What have you heard?" he queried narrowly.

The question came as if cold water had been splashed in Tip's face. By telling this lawman what he knew he would violate his code of ethics. "Nothing," he answered crisply.

The lawman bent hard eyes on the youngster. "I've got two hunches," he mused. "One is that yo're lyin'. The other is the Padres are ready to make a big strike. In doin' so they'll overplay their hand. Outlaws always do. It won't be long now. An' in the meantime I've gotta put faith in you whether I want to or not! Manners has got tuh talk!"

"Why haven't you faith in him?" asked Leah.

Tip and Lance spun. Their conversation had awakened her. She was leaning forward in her chair now, eyeing them both.

The lawman cleared his throat, rose. "Everything'll be all right, Miz Manners," he said. "I'll see to that!" And left the office.

She stared at Tip, her eyes asking questions. Bitterness rose to choke him. There was no use in keeping his past secret from her. Some day she would have to know. It was the only fair thing.

"I'm an ex-outlaw," muttered Tip morosely. "Lance thinks I'm tied in some way with the Padres."

"Are you?"

"No!"

She rose, pulling the blanket about her like a shawl. It made a compact bundle of her body. "There's nothing I can do here," she said softly. "I'll go home and see if I can find my brother." She laid her hand on his arm. "I trust you."

Those three words sent a thrill through Tip. Impulsively, his own hand came up to cover hers. The softness of her skin warmed him. Reluctantly, she pulled away and left the office. He listened as she whirled the buckboard about and sent the horses out of town at a gallop. He resumed his vigil over Jock Manners and gave himself over to thought.

SLOWLY, the grey light of dawn cast its ghostly spell about his quiet office. Tip looked to his patient, changed the bandages

and tested Jock's reflexes. There was no change. The Broken Q owner lay like dead, his only sign of life the slight rise and fall of his barrel chest.

When Tip bathed his face in cold water to drive away his drowsiness, he glanced into the broken mirror above the basin. What he saw didn't please him. A stubble of whiskers darkened his firm chin, and his eyes were red rimmed from lack of sleep. After several facial contortions failed to improve his reflection, he gave it up.

He reached for his shaving kit and lathered his face. His arm was upraised and ready for the first razor stroke when a shot ran its ugly echoes over the street. The blade clattered from his hand, and with lather creaming his features he hit for the street, snatching up his gun from the desk drawer as he passed. As he hit the boardwalk, Lance Manden came barging from his office, two guns in his hands. The quick premonition Tip had had was true.

Down street, in front of the bank, a bunch of masked riders milled. The Padres! And Lance Manden was charging down the center of the street, his two guns blazing. Swiftly, Tip followed, shooting as he went.

But the range and poor light made targeting difficult. Now the outlaws opened up on the advancing two. A hail of lead plowed into the dust of the street. Lance lurched crazily to the left and crashed to one knee, one gun falling from his hand. He triggered the other. Tip made his side, knelt down and fired. His hammer hit on an empty.

As the renegades spun in flight, Lance snapped another shot. An outlaw reeled in his saddle and was caught up by two of his comrades. Then the gang was pounding the dust from town.

"Through the forearm!" gritted the lawman.

Tip helped him to his feet and guided him back to the office. Carefully, he cleaned and cauterized the wound. "Can't use that for at least a week," he cautioned when he was finished.

"Week hell!" growled the sheriff. "I'm leavin' to track those kioats as soon as I can organize a posse."

"You're liable to cripple yourself for life," Tip warned. "You'd be buzzard-bait going against that gang left handed."

"Yo're right," admitted Lance grudgingly. Then his brows drew down and he gripped Tip's arm vise-like. "We've got 'em!" he hissed. He poked the youngster on the chest with the end of his finger. "I winged one of 'em. They'll come to you. When they do . . . you'll go-leavin' a trail for me tuh follow!"—

Tip stiffened. "Mebby he'll die."

"I'll chance that," clipped the sheriff. "I'm playin' luck. It's all I have left. I'm makin' you a deputy right now so's yore damn ethics won't bother yuh!" He fished in his pocket and hung a badge on the youngster's vest. "Don't forget yore duty!" he reminded heavily.

White-lipped and thinking of Leah and her brother, Tip said: "You'd do anything to make a stool pigeon out of a man an' gain your end!"

"Anything!" shot back Lance and slogged back to his office.

AS THE day droned on, Tip fought within himself. If the gang came for him and he left a trail for the sheriff to follow, he would expose Leah's brother at the end of it. That would break her already overly laden heart. He argued that in his own way, by getting Dave Manners out of the country and on the way to a cure for his slavery, he could engineer the Padres into the open so Manden could make his kill. But Tip sensed a showdown now. An ugly premonition came to him he could not fathom and it stayed despite all his efforts to quench it. And when night came on with a sudden rush, he was ready to accept the visitor that reined down cruelly in front of his office. Leah Manners came in quickly, her eyes distraught.

It was a distinct shock to Tip to see her thus. Her writhing eyes were taxed with grief and hate, a strange admixture.

"What?" asked Tip.

Leah's hand pawed nervously at the collar of her dress. "Mrs. Carter's sick!" she managed.

Tip regarded her narrowly. It was obvious she was lying. "Stomach, probably," he said leadingly.

"You'll need everything you have," she said quickly. "Take it all along."

"What's really the matter?" asked Tip. He thought he knew now.

"Dave!" the girl's lips trembled. "He's been shot!"

A bleak wave swept the youngster. "The Padres?"

The words choked from the girl's throat. "I'm afraid not."

Tip's teeth ground together. She knew that Dave Manners carried Lance Manden's bullet in him. He took her by the shoulders. "Don't be too hard on Lance," he murmured. "He was only doing his duty."

Biting her lips, Leah shook her head. "I don't hold it against him. Dave has just never understood."

"I know," answered the young medico placatingly. "I was that way once. But we'll pull him through an' he'll know better. Now you've got to stay here with your father. If he shows signs of coming around give him a teaspoon full of that stimulant prepared in that glass. If Lance comes in asking for me . . . tell him you don't know where I've gone!"

Then he was scooping up his bag and striding toward the back door. When his hand hit the knob, Leah's voice jerked him around. "God bless you!" she murmured.

Fervency and resolve touched Tip. He bowed toward her and knew his love was bright in his eyes. Then he was whirling out the back and running down the alley toward the corral.

CHAPTER IV

A DEAD MAN RIDES TO GLORY

IN THE saddle, he circled the town and lit out toward Carter's place. His mind was a caldron of emotions. He couldn't leave a trail to Dave Manners for Lance. That would bring lasting disgrace on the Manners name. And Lance would never forgive him for letting this capture slip through the lawdog's fingers. Yet, Tip's ethics bade him keep his confidences with his clients. Their secrets were his and could not be sold for fear or money. He galloped madly toward the Carter homestead. He remembered now, that Bish Carter had been one of the men shot by the Padres. Bish's wife ran the small spread by herself now.

At the door of the cabin, he quit his horse and entered while Mrs. Carter held the portal open.

"Glad you're here, Doctor," she said excitedly. "Some men rode by and dumped this poor boy on my doorstep. I'm an old friend of the Manners. I . . ."

Without a word, Tip swept past her into the curtain-draped bedroom. Dave lay on the bed, his face ghastly pale, his eyes closed. With narrowed lids, Tip explored the wound and shook his head. Dave didn't have a chance. He would die. Medical science could not save him. Now he caught the nervous reaction of the youngster's nose. There was but one merciful thing left to do. Give Dave his portion of drug and let him die without suffering. This Tip did. Then he hunkered down and waited for the virus of the powerful stimulant to take hold.

Slowly, color came into Dave's face. His eyes opened and he looked into those of the doctor. He grinned faintly, showing his better nature. "The last chip's cashed, I know," he muttered. "I can feel the bleeding inside."

Tip nodded grimly.

Faint irony touched Dave's lips. "Who sent for you?"

"Your sister," murmured Tip.

A flash of fear crossed Dave's eyes. "She knows?"

"Yes."

"An' Dad?"

"He lays seriously wounded at my office," said Tip. "A Padre bullet."

Hard hate ran through Dave and he clawed to his elbows, his teeth clamped tight. "They did it, damn 'em!" he swore. "I see it all now. They want the whole of Sun Strike Valley. How long have I got, Doc?"

"Maybe eight seconds, maybe eight hours," Tip answered frankly.

"I've got a chore," hissed the youngster. "An' I'll live to do it. Three years ago I was weak. I took to their rotten stuff and became a slave. But for it I'd be dead now." He laughed crazily. "By the same token they won me to their side . . . it'll see 'em all in hell!"

"You're not goin' anywhere," said Tip flatly. "You're liable to pass out any minute."

A nasty chuckle rasped from Dave's throat. "I been dead for three years," he swore. "An' I won't die until I see those hellions through gunsmoke!"

"I won't permit . . .!" began Tip.

Dave jerked the gun still holstered at his thigh. "Get the Carter woman outa the house. I'm ridin'!"

Tip knew there could be no reasoning with this youngster now. He was full of drug and repentance—a dangerous combination. Shrugging, the young medico walked into the other room. "Get me some water from the well," he ordered.

Quickly, the buxom widow complied. She took her bucket and went out back. And at her disappearance, Dave Manners came into the room. Tip gasped at what he saw.

Dave looked like he had risen from the grave—which he surely had. His clothes hung in folds on his frame. His face was gaunt, the color of chalk. The skin sagged lifelessly and his eyes were cold and fixed with purpose. Like a ghost, he stalked past Tip and into the night. He clawed into the medico's saddle and reined toward the hills, a wabbling silhouette in the darkness.

Struck by this bravery of a dying man, Tip hesitated for a moment. Then he was snatching up his bag, running out the back and calling to Mrs. Carter: "I need a horse!"

"Land sakes!" cackled the woman. "What's the matter with the one you rode up on?"

"Dave took it!" rasped Tip and headed for the small corral. He could hear the gasp of incredulity behind him.

Snaking out a mount, Tip saddled up and hit the trail. His mind had made one firm resolve. Dave wanted to clear himself for the tortures he had been through. Tip knew it was his duty to stick by his patient until he was pronounced dead. And he could think of no better death than that of vindication. For once his ethics were shaken. He had no choice but to keep this hate-filled youngster alive until his work was done. In this mad state, Dave was dangerous and had to be handled with care. And the one humane thing to do for this mis-spent life was to help in any way he could for Dave to complete his repentant chore. . . .

NOW the tawny New Mexican moon climbed over the rim of the Tularosas and shot down its eerie light. Ahead of Tip rode Dave Manners, a youngster who reeled drunkenly in the saddle like a rag doll with the starch suddenly gone from its body. Dave held to the saddle horn, his body bent forward along his horse's neck. His mount was choosing his own trail, for no hand touched the reins.

Tip kept close watch on the boy ahead. And he fought the pitiful feeling welling within him at the sight of this sheer bravery and iron nerve. This youngster was fighting desperately against dying to live long enough to lift the yoke of murderous sup-

pression on his family's name and Sun Strike Valley.

Now Tip spurred savagely forward as Dave slumped from his saddle. He got there in time to break the youngster's fall to the ground. The nervous movement of Dave's facial muscles foretold the effect of the drug. It was wearing off. By the moonglow, Tip prepared more. Dave's eyes fluttered open.

"How far we come?" he husked.

"About six miles," Tip answered. "Give it up, Dave. You'll never make it."

Dave cursed. "Only that much more to go. When I get there I only want strength to pull a trigger."

"Come on back," insisted Tip. "Maybe we can cheat the grave."

Dave answered fatalistically: "I feel the sod closin' in. One foot's in the hole now, just a little deeper than three years ago. But there'll be no slippin' until I square up." Then he was clawing back into his saddle and riding on.

Again the young medico's vigil began. It tore at him to be dogging the trail of a grave cheater. And in this courage exhibited by the youngster, Tip could find reasons to forgive Dave's ignorance three years ago. A father who would not excuse his boy's weaknesses, when he should have taught his son how to be strong. Then there was the typical wildness of uncurbed youth. It was natural for Dave to drift with cunning men who treated him as an equal. The inbred Manners' indomitable will was to the fore now. Dave was a bobbing, sagging man on the brink of death, riding on and living with a deadly purpose.

Tip's nerves became raw and jumpy. The ghastliness of the thing was getting him. This human scarecrow who refused to die. Tip found himself wishing that Dave's next fall would be his last and thus liberate him from this awful burden. Shadowing this man on the trail of death was no easy matter, or keeping him alive when he was long overdue at the gates of hell.

Now the lights of the Broken Q loomed ahead. Dave quit his horse, reeled and couldn't rise. Tip lunged to his side, gave him another injection. The last! Dave looked up at him and actually smiled. It sent shudders through Tip. It was as if a dead man lay there grinning at some ghastly joke.

"That's the last of it," he said heavily. He flung his needle away. "The last I'll ever administer. Your span's gettin' shorter, Dave. I doubt it'll last more than twenty minutes."

"That's plenty." Dave's voice was unpleasant to hear. "Boost me up an' strap me in the saddle. I don't want this hoss leavin' me in the air when the fun starts. They taught me how tuh use this dope . . . an' it's bringin' 'em death!"

"Where you going?" asked Tip.

"Goin'?" repeated Dave. "Goin' tuh hell in the only way open. I started on the down trail when Dandy Coyne, Cash Cudlow and Dink Cobo came into Sun Strike. I took a fancy to their ways and strung along. Dad an' I never got along. They taught me tuh smoke the *stuff*, damn 'em, an' twisted me to their will with it. An' now . . . it's boomerangin' on 'em. I'm takin' 'em to hell with me. They planned on ownin' all uh Sun Strike. They killed off the nesters so the land would revert back to free range. When the big spreads were wiped out an' the bank was belly up they meant to take over. But they won't. I'm dyin', Doc. But before I go I'm clearin' the name uh Manners . . . an' provin' to my dad he was wrong about me if he had only taken the patience to find out."

"They'll shoot you to doll rags!" cried Tip.

"So what?" shot back Dave. "They'll only be drillin' a dead man. Get me on that horse!"

Tip had no choice but to comply. He was giving a corpse his last wish. His heart bled for this courageous youngster whose childhood had been blighted by a misunder-

standing father. This was all a horrible mess. And he felt hatred for these renegades who had cunningly taken this young life and twisted it to their diabolical schemes.

When Dave was secure in the leather, Tip pulled his gun from his pocket. The Padres were holed up in the Broken Q ranch house, he knew now.

"I'm goin' in!" he stated crisply.

"Like hell!" cried Dave. "You've got my dad tuh bring through!" And his pistol arced down.

Tip caught the blow on the side of his head and reeled away from Dave's mount. Desperately, he fought off the pain and blinding lights before his eyes.

The youngster was charging the house, his voice lifted in a rebel yell.

Dazedly, Tip heard the front door open and a voice call stridently: "Zat you, Pin?"

"Hell no!" Dave's shriek carried on the still night air.

"Cripes . . . it's the kid!" screamed someone. And guns loosed their hellish beat.

Tip stumbled to the edge of the clearing, his gun thrust before him. He saw the man at the door buckle and go to his knees. Then forms were hurtling from the house, triggering as they came.

Dave's horse was an unmanagable, sky-clawing pony now, pitching and tossing its cargo of nearly dead freight. But through it all the youngster poured lead into those crouching figures thumbing flaming sheets of purple fire at him. The effect was demoralizing. This deadman would not die. And now his shrieking voice came over the shots:

"Marihuana crazy, Coyne! You killed me three years ago . . . how do you expect to now! I'm hopped on the stuff an' takin' you tuh hell with me!"

Spurred by the spirit of the lost youngster, Tip charged those flaming guns. His own piece bucked and roared in his hands and forms writhed down. He was in a berserkian rage against these men who had so foully made a slave of Dave Manners. He was carrying the lead poison into Sun Strike.

NOW Dave's horse was down, pinning the youngster's leg beneath it. But still he fought. Twisting his body, the boy triggered over the dead carcass at the men he hated. Crouching low to run the gauntlet of that leaden sheet, Tip won to his side. He sprawled behind the horse, took fresh shells from the youngster's full belt.

The renegades were deployed about the porch, offering poor targets. Dave's fire swept them and men screamed and died. Then his hammers were hitting on empties, but in his battle-crazed mind he was unmindful of that. He sobbed and cursed and thumbed his guns, then when he realized they were no longer firing, he threw them weakly at the closing ring of renegades.

Tip swore. But three shots remained in his gun. This was a cold deck. He could count five men spreading out to take them in. He snapped shots at them, saw two crumple and lay still.

Tip did not know if Dave had died or not. The boy lay still. The end was near for both of them. Tip found solace in the fact that half the Sun Strike renegades were gone. Whether the leaders had been killed, he couldn't tell. He only knew his own ticket was ready for punching.

Now a new sound permeated the battle. It was the shrill scream of a girl. And the pounding of many hoofs.

"Dave! Dave! Tip!"

"Here!" the young medico shouted lustily and cursed as a bullet nicked his arm. He saw Leah heading Lance and a posse forward at full gallop.

The mad riding posse swept into the ranch yard and rode down the remaining renegades. It was a short and bloody affair, and not one escaped the wrath of the Mogollon men. And when the first pale streak of dawn lowered onto the valley, Sun Strike was free of the cancer eating at its vitals. Leah found her brother and Tip,

Softly calling her brother's name, she sank down beside him, cradling his head in her arms. There was no answer from Dave. His face was soft with death and a tight little smile played the corners of his mouth.

Tip pinched the pain of his wound from his arm. He laid his good hand on the girl's shoulder. "Whatever you might think," he said humbly, "you're wrong. Dave's the bravest kid I've ever known . . . an' one of the finest."

Then he was turning from her, leaving her with her grief. Lance Manden came up and took in the scene. His eyes strayed about the place and over the rigid doctor.

"You didn't leave sign," he charged thickly.

"I know," answered Tip wearily. "But there was a fella who wanted to be a man . . . an' I helped him. Client's secrets are mine."

Lance's eyes shuttled over the dead boy and the girl who tenderly stroked his brow. The sternness of his lawman duty slowly left his face. He fished in his plaid shirt pocket, pulled out a picture. He tilted it so Tip could see his likeness.

"You're more than a doctor, son," he said softly. And he slowly tore the placard to shreds. He turned away, grinding them into the dust with his bootheel.

Flooding relief broke the tension in Tip's body. The weighty depression put upon his shoulders since first coming to Mogollon was gone. The sheriff's actions were more eloquent than words. Tip had won his respect by living his ethics. He had cured the lawman of his sick mind.

Now, he bent down beside the girl. "It's over," he murmured consolingly. "You should be proud."

Leah's eyes were starry with tears. "I am," she murmured through trembling lips. "Of both of you. You've done a lot for my family and Sun Strike Valley, Tip. Father is in the hands of Mrs. Welling in town. Thank God he showed signs of improvement when he did. Sheriff Manden was there at the time. I gave him the medicine as directed. He told us he had found out Coyne, Cudlow and Cobo were the Padre leaders. He was riding in to tell Manden about the bank holdup when one of them shot him. That sent us riding out here. You would have been killed!"

TIP winced from the pain in his arm. "No such luck," he grimaced.

Concern flooded Leah's face. "You're hurt, Tip!" she cried. "You'll need a nurse."

Tip's eyes levelled with hers. What he saw there sent a warmth through him, causing him to forget his hurts. He nodded slowly. "For life," he murmured, and her promise was returned unspoken. It lay deep in her tear-dampened eyes.

GUN-ACTION GALORE
in the December issue of
DETECTIVE YARNS
NOW ON SALE—
FEATURING
12
ACTION STORIES
DEATH IN BROAD DAYLIGHT
By G. T. FLEMING ROBERTS
MURDER IN THE OFFICE
By CARMONY GOVE
Also—OSCAR SCHISGALL—CHARLES BOSWELL

One more massacre in this hell-ridden strip was all that Rough Pool urged of his greaser mob—but he forgot to reckon with the courage and trigger magic of Wallie Bates who flung himself headlong into this hot-lead meelee to rid the range of this lobo breed!

The girl opened the door and aimed the shotgun at the small of Wallie's back.

A GREAT NEW NOVELET

A PUNCHER CHOOSES BOOT-HILL

by **ZACHARY STRONG**

AS Wallie Bates topped the rising hill, the darkness ahead was stabbed by the orange flames of spitting six-guns. Before him, gradually taking shape in the light of a huge full moon, were the ranch buildings of the Running W. As he looked, an answering flash showed that the Running W was replying with hot lead.

"Rough Pool's gang is sure raisin' hell aroun' here!" Wallie growled. He spurred his pinto pony deeply, and horse and rider plunged toward the besieged ranch house.

The buildings were a quarter of a mile away. The full moon bathed Wide Valley in silver light. The pinto tore across the flat like a locoed steer, a wildly galloping streak of frantic horseflesh, crazed by its rider's digging spurs.

Sharp tongues of flame, coming from exploding firearms, licked toward the ranch house from all sides, as Rough Pool's bunch of Mex and half-breed outlaws flung bullets recklessly at the defenders. With whirlwind speed, the pain-maddened pinto galloped onward, straight toward a crouched gunman, one of the encircling crew.

"Travel, Pinto!" Wallie cried, eager to take a hand in the fray.

A startled shout in Mex, as the gunman heard the sound of thudding hoofs and sprang erect, aiming a silver-mounted revolver at the cowboy. That move sealed his doom. The pinto shied to the left, even as Wallie's right-hand six-gun barked. The Mex doubled over, to fall face downward and lie still.

"Got one!" shouted Wallie, racing madly on.

Bullets whined around him from the infuriated outlaw gang. The air about him was punctured by darting death. One bullet nicked his sombrero; another tore through his saddle horn. With a yell of defiance, he flung himself from his sweating horse at the ranch house veranda.

A slap on the horse's flank, and Pinto spurted madly away. Wallie's spurred boots creaked on the veranda, just as a shotgun roared from the nearest window. He leaped for the door. It was locked. He pounded desperately on it.

"Let me in!" he called. "Don't shoot! I'm a friend!"

From the shadows, a hail of bullets sped toward the ranch house, screaming with hatred as they thudded harmlessly against the adobe walls. A vicious lead pellet struck the door knob, shattering it. Wallie's neckerchief twitched, as another Mex bullet grazed his neck.

"Missed me!" he exclaimed, and glanced over his shoulder.

He caught the repeated flashes of a pumping revolver, as a grinning greaser "fanned." Out leaped his left-hand shooting iron, and he sprayed four shots at that murderous Mex. Then he flung himself flat on the veranda, knowing the return fire would come instantly.

A swarm of buzzing bullets tore into the wooden door. A man standing upright would have been torn apart at the waist line by that ferocious stream of lead. Wallie, clinging close to the veranda floor, escaped unscathed.

There was a momentary lull. In the sudden silence, sounds seemed magnified. A girl's voice, strangely loud, came through that riddled door.

"You're no friend of mine, Rough," she said, her voice hard with hatred. "You know it, too. I've got a shotgun trained on the door, and when you break it down, you'll get both barrels!"

"Listen!" called Wallie, as the firing began again. "This ain't Rough Pool, lady. I'm not that onery hound at all. This here is Wallie Bates, a entirely different hombre."

There was a pause, while the girl hesitated, doubtful. A snarling bullet tore the heel from one of Wallie's cowboy boots. A second twisting hunk of lead dug into the veranda floor, two inches from his nose.

"Unlock the door and let me in!" he shouted. "Before I gets punctured plenty! Wallie Bates's the name, I tell yuh!"

THE door creaked open. Inside, all was dark. He crawled swiftly within, felt a soft cool hand touch his face, while the muzzle of the girl's shotgun weighed heavily upon the small of his back. He froze motionless. The shotgun was removed. Wallie breathed again.

"You're not Rough," said the girl quickly, "and you claim you're a friend. All right. Guard the front of the house, friend."

She locked the door, then vanished, blending into the darkness of the house. Wallie grinned grimly to himself, admiration for this girl glowing within him. Taking him on trust, wasn't she! No time wasted in demanding explanations. One regular fellow, that girl!

He snapped into action, throwing fresh cartridges into the smoking cylinders of his revolvers. There were two windows, crossed by iron bars, in this room, which took up the whole front of the house. He crouched at the right-hand window, peering in search of the tell-tale flash of a bullet-belching revolver.

Out there in the shadows, Rough Pool, part white, part Indian and part Mex, as evil a scoundrel as ever deserved a hemp necktie, was concocting a new move against the Running W ranch house. One poisonous breed was Rough Pool, wanted in seven states for murder, with a heart as black as the tiny pointed mustache that perched on his upper lip.

Here in Wide Valley, two hundred miles from the nearest railroad, he and his gang of renegades hovered like wolves about a cornered elk, and made plans to satisfy their lust to kill.

A movement there where the shadows were darkest, and a dim, cursing mass of men scurried forward, the moonlight glinting from their clutched revolvers. It was a desperate charge, for they were lashed on by Rough Pool's softly spoken threats. His silky voice made his Mex and half-breed bravos rush forward madly, to escape his blood chilling promise of tortures to be suffered if the attack failed.

Wallie's eyes narrowed, his six-guns poked above the window sill. Bunched together, a dozen running men now lunged toward the ranch house. The cowboy aimed low, for the light was tricky. He thumbed his straight-shooting guns steadily, spewing twelve shots at the oncoming target.

Bullets whined and bit at the iron-barred window, but Wallie was no longer there. He had raced to the other, reloading as he ran. The attackers were closer now. He gauged their speed. Then, with lightning rapidity, he emptied his two six-guns, and dashed back to his former position.

Grim-eyed, steady of fingers, Wallie inserted more cartridges into his revolvers' cylinders. Acrid powder smoke hung in the air. He felt his shoulder touched by a rounded arm. It was the girl.

"They're jus' about ready to break, ma'am," he told her. "This here flock o' shots 'll bust their charge."

"It has to be done," said the girl regretfully, lifting the shotgun. "They're asking for it." She let go both barrels.

Beside her, Wallie shot coolly, steadily, into the screaming half dozen gun-wielders who still staggered toward them. Two outlaws dropped, quivered and were quiet; one clutched at his leg and, moaning, crawled off in a hasty retreat; the rest fled helter-skelter for safety.

From the nearest shadow, an automatic spat viciously. The bullet tore through the barred window, struck the shotgun's barrel, tearing the weapon from the girl's hand. She drew to the left, out of danger.

"They'll try again, just before daybreak," prophesied Wallie, "if not sooner. "How come this trouble fired up, Miss Forrest?"

"You know my name?" said the girl,

startled. "Just how much do you know about things here in Wide Valley?"

"Plenty," he replied briefly. "I know Rough Pool has been raidin' around here for months. He thinks he owns this whole section o' Mexico. Ol' Arlis Hall, owner o' the next ranch above, quit, sold out to an Easterner a month back. That left on'y the Running W to buck Rough Pool."

"Exactly," agreed the girl, puzzled. "But how did you learn all this?"

Wallie lounged near the window, watching warily for another attack. "Oh, there's ways o' learnin' things. I'm just a rambler. As I travel, I listen.

"Lately I hears Rough Pool and his coyotes is goin' to be wiped out, if they don't move on. And a man says to me, 'Wallie, go over there, see if the Running W is sittin' pertty, then tell that skunk, Rough Pool, if he's in those parts at midday, the sixteenth o' this month, he'll be fertilizing daisies before sunset.' "

"The sixteenth!" the girl exclaimed. "That's tomorrow. Who was the man who told you this?"

"Why, the Easterner who bought Hall's ranch. Name's Vern Bogart. He's a white man!" Wallie nodded heartily. "Yes, sir! He's a white man! He asked me lots o' questions before that. I told him what he wanted to know. I traveled through here three-four years ago."

"It seems too good to be true! You see, after Hall quit and left, Rough ran off all my cows, threatened my punchers until they all left but two, then ordered me to get out. I marched him out of the house at the muzzle of a shotgun and—" She broke off, "I hope nothing has happened to Ward and Leo!"

"I'll look around, ma'am," said the cowboy. He fired a couple of shots at a persistent marksman, just to let that Mex realize that the Running W was still fighting. "I know the layout o' this house. Been here before. You watch from this window."

IN THE center of the ranch house was a patio. Wallie crossed it, calling out, "Wallie Bates' my name! How're yuh makin' it, hombres?"

A cheery voice replied: "Still whole, healthy and hungry, says Ward Stockton, th' cussin' champeen o' Hispana! Knifed any Mexes lately, Wallie?"

"Nope. Made faces yesterday at a sidewinder. All calm?"

"On this side and the rear," Ward answered. "Guess you better see how Leo's makin' out." His voice was worried.

Wallie scurried to the western side of the ranch house, where the other puncher was on guard. In the faint glow from a window criss-crossed by iron bars, he saw a sprawled figure upon the floor. Swiftly he stooped over the man, whose strong lined face was still, the eyes closed.

"This must be Leo," Wallie muttered, exploring fingers busy. "His heart's beatin'. Nothin'—" Then he saw a gash across the man's scalp. "Might be just a crease. Or maybe it's—"

The puncher opened his eyes, stirred, then his hand wavered toward his gun belt.

"I'm a friend," Wallie hastened to reassure him. "You passed out for a minute. Can you sit up?"

Leo muttered, "Yes." He gathered his strength, forced himself erect. Instinctively his hand went to his wounded head. It came away wet and sticky.

"Who're you?" he asked. "I don't remember—"

Wallie Bates explained, his arm around Leo's waist, holding him erect. The puncher listened gravely, shrewd eyes estimating this newcomer, watching him in the dim light that came in through the barred window.

"Sounds reasonable," said Leo, when the story was finished. "All but that part about midday tomorro'. Seems like that part don't matter. We won't see the sunrise even, much less twelve o'clock."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Wallie. "Your six-

guns ain't even warmed up yet! All we got to do is keep 'em at a distance. If they comes in a mob, we mow 'em down! If they comes one by one, we pick 'em off!"

"Yeah?" Leo grinned, amused. "But what'll they be doin' while we're—?" He stopped, gasped, his eyes fixed on the barred window.

A frightful face peered in at them. Thanks to the iron bars which, Mexican fashion, were at all the ranch house's windows, the outlaw could not gain an entrance. His black hair straggled over a low forehead; beneath were two liquid eyes, as merciless as a puma's. Thick lips were drawn back in a snarl from white, animal-like teeth. The breed was in the act of tightening his trigger finger; pointed straight at Leo's heart was a blue-steel Colt.

The wounded puncher, still dazed from the head injury, had an instant of despair. The outlaw had the drop on him. Leo was the fastest gun-slinger on the Running W, but now he had no chance. But if luck was with him—if the impossible happened—if the breed paused to gloat—Leo had to gamble; he had to. His hand streaked to a gun butt. He'd shoot through the holster.

There was a burst of flame beside him. Wallie's revolver roared a split-second before the breed's Colt exploded. That tiny fraction of time was enough.

The outlaw's bullet pierced the ceiling. His Colt slipped from his relaxing fingers, into the room. An expression of surprise crossed the loose-lipped face. His whole arm was numb, useless, from the shoulder down. Wallie's snap shot had come just in time. Noiselessly the outlaw vanished.

Leo drew a long breath. "Cowboy, that was shootin'!" he declared, taking his hand from his gun butt. "I want to thank— I don't know how to say it."

"Save your breath," cut in Wallie. "I thought sure you'd stop talkin' to me and start conversin' with Saint Peter. And we hadn't finished palaverin'."

A shudder shook the puncher's body. Even the bravest men, after a moment of peril, find themselves weak, their nerves quivering.

"Let's talk it over later," Leo mumbled. "Just now—"

Wallie understood. A minute or two alone, and the puncher would get back his composure. Besides, there were matters to be attended to.

That breed's face at the window suggested unpleasant possibilities to Wallie. All the while Leo had been unconscious, that side of the house was unguarded. Perhaps more of the outlaws, besides that one breed, had managed to creep up close to the ranch house walls.

Making the puncher as comfortable as he could, Wallie left him. He entered the patio, with its tinkling fountain and waving palms. First he would make sure that the girl was safe and alert.

A cry from Ward, at the rear of the building, halted him.

"Plenty target practice here!" Ward shouted. "Come a-runnin'!" He went into action, with guns and tongue, swearing with the fluency that had won him the title of "cussin' champeen o' Hispana."

WALLIE took two steps, on the way to assist Ward, when the sound of splintering wood and the girl's voice stopped him. Her words came clearly, strong and composed.

"They're breaking down the door! This way, Wallie!"

Not for an instant did Wallie hesitate. More of the bandits had crept up to the ranch house walls. In gigantic strides, overturning palms in his haste, he ran toward the front of the house. Six-guns out and ready, a terrible fighting light in his eyes, the cowboy sped across the patio to the girl's assistance.

Her shotgun boomed twice. There was a louder crash as the door gave way. Rough Pool's horde of outlaws boiled inside, guns popping, knives flashing.

Knowledge of what had happened gave greater length to Wallie's strides. Like a charging lion, he burst into the front room, fired one shot aloft so he could see his enemies and find out where the girl was. He wanted no bullet of his to hit her.

That first "sighting" shot also gave him away to the bandits. In the momentary flash they saw him, crouched in a gun-fighter's pose, feet wide apart, revolvers pointed before him, hate and determination written on his hard, grim features.

Immediately to the cowboy's right was a bandit dandy, big gray sombrero tilted upon slick black hair, cold hard snake-eyes set close above a nose that flared at the nostrils, a dainty mustache above a red full mouth. This was Rough Pool.

With the quickness of light, the outlaw chief brought a six-gun crashing down on the top of Wallie's head. It was a vicious blow, backed by steel-strong muscles. The world exploded in the cowboy's mind. Consciousness vanished with the quickness of the flame of a blown-out candle.

When Wallie came back to consciousness, the ranch house was full of light. Looters raced from room to room, yelling with pleasure as they found things they wanted. Bear rugs had been hacked to pieces, in a wanton destructiveness. Pictures were torn down from the walls. Books were scattered underfoot.

Wallie was in a corner of the big room, where he had been dragged out of the way. Beside him crouched the girl, and for the first time he saw her clearly. Slender and bobbed-haired and composed, wearing riding breeches, leather puttees, and a shirt, there was an air about her that he liked. Her attitude toward the looters was one of supreme contempt. Though her possessions were being destroyed and taken away, she maintained her self-control.

"A little thoroughbred!" the cowboy muttered, even as he gritted his teeth at the pain that throbbed through his head.

Facing the two prisoners, and fingering a razor-edged machete, was a forbidding figure. Their guard had the inscrutable eyes of a Chinaman, almond-shaped, black. The rest of his features were of a strong Indian cast, high cheekbones, a cruel mouth, long straight black hair. Continually he tested, with blunt fingers, the sharpness of the machete, a hacking knife with a two-foot blade.

The girl noticed Wallie's movement. Her cool hand touched his forehead. He tried to grin.

"I'm sorry I called for help," she told him. "Perhaps, if I hadn't—"

Not a word of their peril, here at the mercy of a cutthroat outlaw, who delighted in torturing prisoners! No tears, no fear, no despair! Wallie, seeing such courage, swore that no harm should come to this girl.

"You done right, ma'am," Wallie declared. "I was just a mite late in gettin' here." He rose to a sitting position, fighting against the dizziness that threatened to overcome him. "Where's the top thief o' this here outfit? I've a message for him." He switched into Spanish. "Where's Rough?" he asked the guard.

The breed shrugged, blunt fingers caressing the edge of the machete.

"Won't get nothin' outa him till he wants to tell me," the cowboy concluded. "Seen anything o' Ward and Leo?"

"No." The girl's underlip trembled. "I heard shots. Think one or both of them tried to get away."

"Hope they got." Wallie forced himself to his feet. Those empty holsters — he didn't feel right, comfortable, without the down drag of his six-guns.

The cowboy's rising brought a gleam to their guard's small eyes. He tensed, staring at the two prisoners, the machete handle gripped in one hand, the other cradling the long, sharp blade.

Wallie slid slowly to a sitting position again, while the guard watched disappointedly.

"That hombre sure craves to carve with

that there machete," the cowboy muttered to himself. "Mustn't give him no chance."

BY NOW, most of the valuables desired had been taken outside by the looters. Dawn vanished, and the valley was filled with bright sunlight. Within the house, however, the oil lamps still burned. Rough Pool, suave and soft-voiced, his big gray sombrero tilted at a jaunty angle, tossed an order to the breed who guarded the two prisoners.

"See here!" snapped Wallie. "Vern Bogart, who bought ol' Arlis Hall's ranch, gimme a message for you."

The outlaw chief rolled a brown-paper cigarette, observed its perfect roundness with satisfaction. "Senor Bogart has thrown away much monee," he remarked. "That ranch eet ees mine. Thees ranch, the Running W, eet also ees mine!"

"That's what you think. But you'll learn different. Vern Bogart says if you're in these parts by noon today, you'll be buzzard food by sunset!"

Rough threw back his head, opened his mouth as if laughing, but no sound came. His tiny mustache quivered, his body shook with merriment, but his laughter could not be heard. The bandit's silent mirth was grotesque, horrible, blood-chilling. At the sight, the girl shivered, then bit her lip until a little thread of crimson ran down her chin.

"Laugh while yuh can," Wallie advised firmly. "Yuh won't this afternoon. Sure's my name's Wallie Bates—"

"Ah, senor, you are veree funnee! I will be buzzard food and before sunset? No, that will be you! Before sunset, Senor Bates, buzzard food you will be!"

Rough addressed the almond-eyed guard. "If either of these prisoners escape," he said in a silky voice, "the soles of your feet will be sliced off. Remember!"

A moment later, Wallie and the girl were herded from the ranch house to where horses awaited them outside. All was confusion. The bandits were gay, jubilant, loading their loot, ready to start out for their headquarters.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Wallie whispered to the guard: "Let the girl slip out o' sight—"

Instantly that machete swished through the air in a downward stroke. The sharp knife sliced through the cowboy's right-hand leather holster as if it had been paper. The guard's almond eyes gleamed.

"No!" he said harshly. "If one prisoner escapes, I kill the other! Dog of a gringo, I—"

Rough strolled up, twirled his tiny mustache, listened to the torrent of abuse that poured from the breed's mouth. His eyes twinkled, as he watched Wallie. The cowboy, at the third word, felt his skin grow cold, his mouth hot and dry, his scalp twitch, as unreasoning fury consumed him. No man could use those words to him and live! Blindly he rushed forward, ignoring that slashing machete, intent only upon battering that loose-lipped mouth to a pulp.

Rough thrust his foot between Wallie's legs, and the cowboy floundered face-down to the earth. The machete passed harmlessly through the air, cleaving the space where the cowboy's body had been.

"Tie the Americanos' hands behind their backs," Rough ordered. "Put them on horses. And, be careful not to kill either of them. I have plans for them both."

Plans for them both! The phrase ran through Wallie's mind as the cavalcade started off. A herd of Running W horses, loaded with loot, brought up the rear. Side by side, surrounded by self-satisfied outlaws, the two Americans rode toward the mountain pass that led to the bandit's headquarters.

PLANS for them both! Wallie worked furtively at his bonds, hoping to loosen them. But the rope had been expertly tied. Not by the barest trifle did those knots give.

Torture—that was the outlaw chief's

plan. Stories that had drifted across the border returned to Wallie's mind. Indian *torture, of cruelties* so horrifying that description of them made his stomach turn.

The girl rode beside him, head held high. She was white, now, beneath her healthy tan. Not a word of censure had she said. Over rough country, through rocky canyons, the trail led, Wallie and the girl, about them the outlaw band, while the guard, his blood-thirsty machete always ready, watched the prisoners with his blank, inscrutable, almond-shaped eyes.

They came to drear, desolate country, a place of forbidding cliffs, of boulders balanced askew, of raw red earth. Nature, in a fit of fury, had flung here a mass of discarded material, evil, sterile, worthless. Slicing a dull gray cliff was a dry river bed, from which heat waves quivered in the morning sun.

Of a sudden Rough deserted his place at the head of the column. A smile twitched his tiny black mustache.

"Senor Bates, here we must part," he said in his suave, smooth voice. "Buzzard food? Before sunset?" He gestured aloft, where a scavenger bird floated in a cloudless sky. "You'll have a visitor soon."

Wallie's mouth set in a firm line. He made no reply.

"Alberto, chop four stakes with your machete," the outlaw chief ordered. "Understand? Use your own rope to fasten the Americano." He turned to Wallie. "Have you any objections?"

The cowboy ignored that sardonic question. What if he did object? There was Alberto, the stakes quickly chopped from a nearby clump of brush. The breed's two-foot blade would hack, hack, cutting muscles from bones, slashing. . . . And then Wallie would be staked out anyway.

Beg for mercy, plead for his life, cower, cringe. These things Rough wanted the cowboy to do. With what result? None. Too many tales of Rough Pool's ways traveled up and down the country. Show mercy? No, Rough would merely laugh, see that his orders were carried out. Nothing would change his mind.

Instead, Wallie spoke to the girl. "Luck, Miss Forrest," he said nonchalantly. "Remember what I told yuh about Vern Bogart."

HER eyes misted. She turned instinctively to the bandit chief, who watched, gloating the while, as horror and revulsion twisted her features.

"Don't bother with him," Wallie said harshly. "Before sunset, Rough'll wish he'd never been born."

"But you!" the girl exclaimed. "The buzzards—"

"Ma'am, I've always been lucky. Ramblin' 'round as I've done, I've noticed somethin' always happens whether yuh wish it would or not. Somethin's goin' to happen!"

He grinned, stood watching while Alberto drove the stakes in the form of a square, ten feet apart. The breed's slanted eyes held a tiny light as he roped the cowboy's arms and legs, one at a time, to the stakes.

Face up, tied tight, legs wide apart, arms upflung, Wallie stared at the sky. Beneath him, the gravel bed of the dry river was hot. The cavalcade moved off, save Rough. In silence, the outlaw chief stared at the pegged-down man. Unconquerable courage kept the cowboy's mouth firm, his eyes steady. Not a sound passed his lips.

Rough smoked a cigarette halfway down, lighted another, which burned to an inch-long stub in his fingers. Still there was no sign of the cowboy's nerve breaking. Without a word, he stared at the sky.

With an evil grin, Rough leaned over, pressed the glowing spark of his lighted cigarette upon the cowboy's hand. There was a spasmodic twitch of the long brown fingers. Rough shifted his eyes.

"It ain't a bit o' use," he said, "but I'll offer to fight yuh with knives, guns, or just

bare fists. Or yuh can have all the weapons you want—and me, nothin'."

"Not a bit of use," Rough agreed. "I decline your invitation, senor. I've been waiting for— See?" Circling downward was the buzzard that had been far up in the sky. "The zapalote comes to feast. You'll soon be entertaining other visitors, Senor Bates."

The outlaw's favorite mount, a pie-bald with white hindquarters, was near by. Rough swung into the saddle.

"This afternoon," he remarked, "if I can find the time, I'll ride over to see you. There's a particularly ferocious species of ant in this vicinity. They love sweets. I'll bring some honey with me.

"Have you ever smeared honey upon a bound man, and watched these ants gather? First, the honey draws them. Then the man —ah—interests them. The man's behavior, as the ants crawl over him, then begin to devour him—" He went into a burst of silent laughter, noiseless horrible laughter, soundless blood-chilling laughter, and cantered off.

Wallie closed his eyes. Soon he heard the flap of wings; a bald-headed scavenger of the desert places had come to feast. There was a slinking, unclean air about this gaunt, blear-eyed bird of bedraggled black. It perched on a rock a short distance off.

For a moment panic seized the cowboy. He tugged with frantic crazy strength at the stakes. The rope bit into his flesh. If one of the stakes pulled from the gravelly river bed, he could use it as a weapon. If two pulled free— Every muscle in his splendid body was exerted to the utmost and beyond. Now, while he was fresh and strong, was his best chance to release himself.

THE ropes held. The stakes stayed solidly firm.

At last, panting, spent, exhausted, he lay still. Alberto had done his work well.

The sun climbed higher, beat with ferocious intensity upon the helpless man there in the river bottom. A black rusty bird, with a long beak and an ungainly stride, hopped closer to that helpless man, sidled revoltingly away when shouted at, then slithered closer, ever closer.

Wallie's voice became hoarse, because of his shouting. The buzzard grew bolder. Here was meat! Food! Hunger drove that carrion bird persistently forward. It flapped its wings, soared to the chest of the pegged-out man. To a zapalote, a man's eyes are a tidbit, a delicacy, delicious.

The cowboy's shout was but a faint whisper, though he drove the breath from his lungs fiercely. He squirmed—a last, despairing effort to frighten the buzzard away. So tightly was he tied that his body barely moved. The bird lifted one claw, cocked its head sideways, paused, watching, listening.

The crunch of gravel beneath heavy boots and a bloody, staggering figure lurched into view. Leo, exhausted to the point of numbness, strained doggedly on the trail of Rough Pool's outlaw band. Leo was more dead than alive. An untended gash on his head was covered loosely by his soiled and blood-stained neckerchief. Grimly he forced himself after the bandits and their helpless prisoners.

Leo was a man who never forsook a friend or evaded an enemy. A new friend or an old friend, he stood by staunchly. A new enemy or an old enemy, he was always ready for hostilities.

Doris Forrest, the girl who owned the Running W, was one of Leo's old friends. That morning, just before daybreak, Leo had found a new friend—Wallie Bates. An old enemy and a dangerous, vicious one had captured these two, so Leo was on the hunt. Somewhere along that sun-blasted, torture trail he would find them; he'd rescue them from the horror of Rough's brutality, or die trying.

He was tired, thirsty, and that head wound throbbed maddeningly as he stum-

bled along the edge of the dry river bed. With redrimmed, aching eyes he peered ahead, then to the right. He dragged his leaden feet a few steps farther, peered to the left.

Something moved against the dull gray cliff. A black, shadowy something swooped and settled. A buzzard!

Leo brushed a dust-covered hand across his burning eyes and tried to see what the bird wanted there. Then, with a shout that was an exclamation of joy and a curse of terror, he plunged over the loose gravel toward a man who lay staked out on the dry river bed.

That pegged-down man lived! He fought with rolling head and heaving chest to rid himself of the feathered horror that would feast.

LEO shouted again, made futile, wild gestures, burst into prayers that were curses. The scavenger bird hesitated, undecided. Desire for food fought with fear of this approaching, yelling human. It sidled away, ran a few steps, flapped its wings. Croaking in baffled fury, it soared aloft and away.

Panting, swearing, sobbing, Leo flung himself down beside the helpless Wallie. With frantic, gentle hands, he caught the rolling head and held it still.

"The damn coyote! The rotten, black-hearted devil!" he gasped. "And Miss Doris—" He broke off his fury-wild imprecations, as he felt a tremor ripple through the arm he was struggling to wrest free from the knotted rope. "That damn bird didn't git your eyes. And that damn coyote won't hurt Miss Doris. We'll find her, Wallie. We got to find her. And Rough, we'll find him too. Find him an'—"

Minutes elapsed while Wallie lay inert, motionless. Then his head began to roll again. He jerked an arm weakly, then his legs. He was free! By degrees, he realized he was free; that Leo was really here beside him; that the darting, sharp-pointed beak had not reached his eyes. He sighed, relaxed; a grin twitched his cracked lips.

"Yuh got here just in time, Leo. Thought yuh'd been wiped out."

Leo laughed bitterly, horribly. "They only killed Ward an' carried Miss Doris and you away. Me, I played 'possum an' got away with it." His eyes grew misty, and he began to sob with fury. "They've got the boss o' the Running W, Wallie. My boss in that devil's hangout that we've got to find. And we got to be quick. Quicker'n hell fire, Wallie. Quicker'n—"

Now, Wallie Bates felt his strength coming back. He sat up, struggled over on hands and knees, then swayed to his feet.

"A spring, other side o' that red-streaked rock," he whispered, dropping an arm across Leo's shoulder. "An' Vern Bogart'll help us save the boss o' the Running W."

Mystified, but knowing that water was of prime importance, while explanations would keep, Leo helped the cowboy toward the spring. Water! Stagnant, warm, brackish water, but it would give them strength.

And they must go on and on and on. The bandit hide-out was their destination. For Doris Forrest was at the mercy of a pack of outlaws—outlaws led by a fiend who delighted in torture. The thought burned in Leo's brain and oaths burst from his swollen lips.

To Wallie, thought of the girl's plight brought agony. He pictured her, with high-held head and courageous eyes. A slender, bobbed-haired girl in riding breeches, leather puttees, a khaki shirt—with supreme contempt she had faced her soft-voiced captor. Wallie shivered though the sun blazed down upon him. He dared not think of the tortures Rough Pool might inflict upon Doris Forrest.

"If I could only do somethin'!" Leo's half-crazed voice was rambling on. "But they took my guns. After I'd killed two of 'em, and played 'possum when they came for me, they took my guns and then—Ward's hands—chopped off—and he wasn't

dead, either. I heard 'em laughin'—"

"Quit thinkin' 'bout that, Leo," Wallie ordered grimly. "We'll get Rough Pool and his whole gang. Vern Bogart'll come through in time. But if he don't—" His hands, fingers curved like claws, came together in a squeezing, choking gesture. With difficulty he got to his feet, from beside that lukewarm spring, set in a hollow where the sun blazed fiercely. "Let's go!"

Stumbling, staggering, shot through with pain, they took up the pursuit again. One was weak from torture; the other weary and wounded. But within them was the clear, high flame of courage that only death could snuff out. Within them was the cold fury of men who hate. Within them the code of the West lived, the code that says a woman in danger must be rescued.

AN HOUR later, the two men plodded wearily along a canyon that opened into a smooth valley, which sloped southward. At the northern end, high cliffs formed an impassable wall, with only one opening. Toward this opening the bandit trail led. Mountain peaks rose skyward. For miles, the cliffs continued.

"That's their hangout," said Wallie. "Beyond them cliffs. That canyon ahead opens into a big valley; only one way in, and the one way out."

Leo touched his head wound, which had broken open again, his neckerchief was freshly stained with red. A fierce smile broke the grimness of his face.

"They're trapped!" he exclaimed.

"Yep. But that entrance is guarded, I bet. If Vern Bogart was only here—"

"He ain't." The sight of the opening in the cliff gave Leo fresh strength. "No guns, not even a jack-knife, but what does it matter?"

"Not two cents' worth," Wallie agreed. I'll bet the Mex on guard has got a gun. Let's get it!"

The smooth valley floor offered no concealment. Straight toward the canyon went the two men, straight toward a black-haired Mex who had spots of white skin on his brown hands and face. The outlaw rested his rifle upon a black rock, aimed carefully, and fired. The bullet dug into the earth at Wallie's feet.

The rifle shot echoed in the valley. The two Americans separated.

"Take him from the right!" Wallie ordered. "He's our meat!"

The canyon mouth widened, there where the guard waited. Leo raced straight for the cliff. A bullet whizzed by him, but he sped on. He took cover among a cluster of rocks, and began to edge up on that concealed Mex.

Without increasing his stride, Wallie kept directly toward the outlaw. Recklessly, calmly, he plodded toward that concealed marksman. A lead pellet fanned his cheek.

"Shoot, damn yuh!" he shouted fiercely. "I can't wait for Vern Bogart, so I'm givin' yuh a chance to kill an unarmed man!"

The steady advance of this Americano gnawed at the outlaw's nerve. He pumped bullets at Wallie, in his haste shooting wildly. And where was that other, the puncher with the neckerchief stained with red, who had darted for cover among the rocks?

Leo was out of sight of the Mex, but advancing swiftly. He picked up a rock, the size of a baseball, and flung it against the cliff wall, to his rear.

The Mex heard the clatter of that rock. He glanced that way. When his eyes returned to Wallie, the cowboy was much closer. Steadily, relentlessly, the Americano advanced.

Emptying his rifle, filling it again, that Mex sprayed the ground ten feet ahead of Wallie, then sent a magazine-load over his head. A coward himself, the outlaw was unnerved by the cowboy's daring. Fingers aflutter, he tried to force more cartridges into the rifle. For the time being, Leo was forgotten.

A GRIMY, fierce-eyed figure darted behind that black rock and crashed down upon the Mex. He fought like a cat, with teeth, fingernails, knees and feet. Leo, in his weakened condition, could not choke him into submission.

Hurrying up, Wallie saw the whirling, struggling men. The outlaw had one hand tight-gripped upon Leo's throat. His other hand was clawing for a bone-handled dagger on his hip. Wallie grabbed for the rifle, which had fallen in a crevice in the rocks. His seeking fingers missed the barrel.

Now, the Mex got his knife free. Leo's face was blue. In vain he tried to yank those throttling fingers from his throat. The knife flashed up, then started down.

Like lightning, Wallie flashed erect, kicked out, and the boot toe caught the bandit's wrist fairly, sending the knife curving through the air, reflecting the sunlight. Once more the cowboy kicked viciously. His foot struck the outlaw's temple with terrific force. The Mex crumpled. His white-and-brown face became blank. His fingers relaxed.

Leo shoved the Mex from him, took the man's guns. "Thanks, Wallie," he said, breathing heavily. "Glad this hombre was a two-gun man." He searched for, and found the knife. Then, looking down at the unconscious bandit, he asked: "Are we takin' prisoners?" With the words, he pointed one of the revolvers at the outlaw's head.

"Hold it!" Wallie commanded sharply. "Don't shoot him. I believe half of Rough's gang would leave him, if they wasn't afraid of him. Tie him up with his belt."

Swiftly they strapped the unconscious outlaw's hands behind his back. Stripping him of his gun belt and rifle ammunition, they started along the winding canyon that led to the bandits' hangout.

Suddenly the clatter of horse's hoofs sounded. A shod animal was galloping toward them.

"Rough's sent somebody to find out about the shootin'," Wallie remarked. "Here's where we get a horse. You grab the bridle; I'll tend to the hombre."

Around a bend in the canyon came a magnificent bay stallion, ridden by a half-breed in *charro* costume—short pale-blue jacket, trousers that laced at the sides, a wide flat-brimmed sombrero, decorated with a woven leather band.

"Lift them hands!" Wallie ordered, the captured rifle at his shoulder. "Le's see yuh dismount!"

For answer, the breed drew a six-gun and fired. But Wallie pulled trigger a shade ahead of him. The breed's body lost its easy swaying in time to the horse's motion. He fell limply sideways, as Leo dashed for the stallion's head.

"Right between the eyes," Leo marveled, even as he jerked the horse to a stop. "Good shootin'! Now, git his guns!"

HOURS had passed since Rough Pool's gang had left the Running W. Every moment that Doris Forrest remained in the bandits' custody, she was in peril. Wallie and his partner had not an instant to waste. Grim-faced, they went about relieving this outlaw of his six-guns, Wallie buckled on the gun belt with its revolvers and ammunition.

"Now," he cried, swinging into the saddle, "we're fixed! Climb on behind, Leo, and we'll go!"

Leo swung aloft, and the stallion charged up the canyon in response to the prods of four digging heels. The horse was deep-chested and powerful, with strong lungs that bespoke endurance. Revolvers ready, faces hard despite their fatigue, the two Americans rode madly toward the outlaw lair.

Plunging swiftly around curves, galloping fiercely up straight stretches of the canyon, the bay stallion and his double load sped onward. Sparks flew from the horse's hoofs.

The two riders peered ahead, alert-eyed, for enemies.

Abruptly the canyon opened out into a hidden valley. Adobe shacks clustered about a large, squat house, with a sloping red roof. Probably the big building was reserved for Rough's use. The small shacks, very likely, were occupied by his men.

Almost straight overhead, the sun blazed down upon the little settlement. It appeared deserted. The outlaw gang were sleeping after celebrating the looting of the Running W. An armed sentinel, on guard before the big building, drowsed on his feet, leaning upon his rifle. His forehead rested upon the gun muzzle.

Like the rolling of thunder came the sound of the big bay stallion's hoofs. Before the sentinel was half awake, the horse slid to a stop ten feet away. The two Americans leaped to the attack.

The dust caused by the stallion's abrupt stop slowly settled. The sentinel lay in a crumpled heap against the wall. One of his eyes was puffed up, where Leo's fist had landed. A lump on the side of the sentinel's jaw proved that Wallie had struck one blow.

Whirling, the two cattlemen flung themselves against the door to the big house. Together, in one ferocious drive, their shoulders crashed into that door. It gave, burst open, then hung crazily askew, by one hinge, as they crowded inside.

They found themselves in a large, ornate room, cluttered up with fragile furniture, imported from France. Rough Pool's taste ran to spindle-legged chairs, carved tables, embroidered silk scarves that were hung upon the walls.

Sweating, grimy eyes, sunk deep into their heads from fatigue, Wallie and Leo stared at the two people already in the room.

While they stared, a cuckoo clock began to sound the hour. It was a tall gilt clock, with a swinging pendulum. A little yellow wooden bird came from the clock's depths and flapped its wings. It was midday.

Rough Pool was struck motionless with astonishment. His hands, slender, cruel hands, were poised almost touching Doris Forrest's throat. The gloating evil smile vanished from his mouth when he saw the newcomers.

DEFIANTLY erect, unafraid, the girl stood waiting for the clutch of those cruel hands. Courage flamed in her eyes. Every atom of her body was afire with determination not to cringe.

When her rescuers crashed recklessly through the door, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her nerves were close to the breaking point.

With an oath, Leo plunged toward her, kicking aside a three-legged table loaded with blue china tea things. "If Rough's hurt you—" Leo began.

Before he reached the girl, Wallie had jumped to the outlaw chief. A six-gun across the temple knocked Rough down. The cowboy followed furiously, raining blows upon his head.

"Shoot him like a dog!" Leo shouted. "We haven't time—"

Rage swirled before Wallie's eyes. Sight of Rough had infuriated him. But even in his fury, the cowboy kept his head. That flailing six-gun, showering pain upon the bandit, kept him from shouting for help. Like most people who enjoy seeing other people suffer, Rough shivered away from pain himself.

"Now, get up!" Wallie ordered the quivering, whining wretch who pleaded for mercy. "No, I'm not going to shoot you now. Buzzard food before sunset; that's what I said. It still goes!"

There were shouts outside, the sound of feet shuffling in the dust. Explosive Spanish exclamations came, as the sentinel's senseless body was found.

Rough Pool, cowering before Wallie, began to smile. His cringe vanished. He began to straighten up. One hand strayed

toward the tiny mustache on his upper lip.

"Senors," he said, "you have made one big mistake! I think—"

"You think bow-legged," cut in Wallie, grasping Rough's arm and jamming a six-gun into the bandit's chest, directly above the heart. "You and me, Rough, will walk out that door first. Mebby so there'll be shootin'. If so, the first bullet plows through your black heart, savvy?"

The bandit wilted a trifle, then tried to grin. "We will both be buzzard meat, senor," he said. "My men—"

"I'll talk to your men!" Wallie declared. "Not a word from you, Rough! I savvy Espanol! Open your mouth, an' this argument about buzzard food'll end pronto! Get goin'!"

Covered by the threatening revolver, Rough walked reluctantly to the door. Wallie stood beside him, one revolver pressed over the bandit's heart. In his other hand, the cowboy held a gun which he pointed at the group of outlaws who had gathered around the sentinel's body.

"Hands up, hombres!" Wallie called harshly, in Spanish. "Keep 'em up, too, till I get out o' range. Remember, the first hostile move means a bullet!" Over his shoulder, he said to Leo: "Follow me outside. Cover this gang, quick! See that Miss Forrest walks so that Rough is between her an' the bandits. We're retreatin' to that canyon!"

The outlaws, sodden from their celebrations, gaped in surprise. Here was the Americano they had seen securely staked up in that dry river bed, hours before! And he was armed! And their leader, Rough Pool, his face and head a gory mass, was being threatened by a revolver in the hands of this gringo! Their hands stupidly went skyward.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wallie saw Leo slip through the door and stand beside him. There was only one revolver in Leo's hand. Where was the other one?

Then Wallie saw her. Doris Forrest had that other gun. Its menacing end was directed at the befuddled gang of outlaws who were gazing, open-mouthed.

"Now, let's get to that canyon mouth," said Wallie softly. "These hombres will wake up soon. And when they do—"

"I'll take Rough," came Doris Forrest's clear, cool voice. "I've never shot a man, but I'll shoot Rough Pool if he tries to get away."

Wallie grinned to himself. Here was a wonderful girl, all right.

"No hostile moves, hombres!" he called. "Be reckless, an' yuh won't be sorry—yuh'll be dead! Likewise, we'll plug the boss bandit. Keep them hands h'isted!"

BACKING away warily, watching keenly for sight of a drawn enemy revolver, they started toward the canyon mouth. Rough Pool, after one glance at the girl's merciless eyes, made no resistance. Wallie and Leo, crouched and ready to fire, brought up the rear.

Five yards—ten yards. Their pace quickened. Then some of the outlaws began to move uneasily. Heads peered from nearby shacks. Shouts sounded from farther off. Two bandits darted behind the big house.

"They'll try to cut us off!" Leo cried. "Shoot Rough and let's run for it!"

Wallie gazed at the sky. "Vern Bogart ought to be here!" he muttered. "He said 'Noon, of the sixteenth.' "

But one shack now remained, before they would reach the rocky, dipping road that led to the canyon. Out of this adobe hut swaggered a bull-necked ruffian bearing a rifle.

"Juan!" Rough shouted. "Save—"

Before he could speak another word, Wallie leaped to the chief bandit's side and shot him through the arm. Another bullet flashed from the cowboy's gun. It struck Juan, who had raised the rifle to his shoulder. That bullet hit squarely between

Juan's eyes. He fell forward, the rifle beneath him.

"Now, run!" Wallie commanded.

He grasped Rough by the wounded arm, yanked him along, while the outlaw chief whimpered and whined. Bullets sang wickedly about them. One zipped close by Rough's head, and the sound gave wings to his feet. The girl sped after him, her six-gun ready.

"If we reach the canyon," Wallie said, stopping and firing at a pursuing outlaw, "we can hold 'em off—"

Leo paused beside his friend, reloaded his revolver. "It'll be close!"

Firing at the more reckless of their pursuers, taking advantage of every bit of cover, they fought a rear-guard action that brought them halfway to the canyon mouth. Once more Wallie raked the sky with anxious eyes.

"Where's Vern Bogart?" he asked himself. "Always on time, that hombre . . . up to now. If he—"

Shouting, roaring, wild with the blood lust, the bandit gang suddenly surged out of the little village. Mounted upon horses, they thundered out after their prey. Wallie groaned, sought cover behind an outcropping of rock beside the road. He glanced around to see where his friends were.

Leo was near by, loading his one six-gun again. The puncher stood in the middle of the road, as calm as if in the ranch house of the Running W.

Farther down the road, Rough Pool was on his knees. By his supplicating hands, it was clear he was begging for his life. Doris Forrest stood before the bandit, cool, self-possessed. She was estimating the distance of the outlaw gang, waiting for the moment when all hope left her. Then, and not until then, it was clear that she would shoot Rough.

Again Wallie peered at the sky. Was that a tiny speck? Yes! A buzzard or—No, it wasn't a buzzard!

"Vern Bogart!" Wallie shouted. He tossed his sombrero into the air. "Now we'll see something!" Grimly he stepped from behind the sheltering rock, aimed his six-guns at the advancing bandits, and shot slowly, making each bullet count.

The speck became larger, took form as a biplane. It dived with tremendous speed directly down toward that hidden valley. The sound of its motor came faintly, then loudly, then vibrated from the encircling cliffs.

THE bandits heard the thunder of the motor, looked up, saw the huge man-made bird almost upon them. Shrieks slashed the air. It seemed as if the airplane was going to crash upon them.

Then came the vicious rattling of a machine gun. Bullets spattered along the road, as the airplane gunner let fly. The plane swept down upon that leaderless bandit gang, frightening their horses, spewing death in a continuous stream.

The plane flashed by, turned, banked, and returned. Once more it swooped upon the terrified outlaws, and the machine gun took toll in the disorganized, fearful gang.

"Lie down!" Wallie shouted. "Play dead!"

Leo dropped, as ordered. So did the boss of the Running W and her prisoner.

But the outlaws were too crazed with fear to hear that order. They fled in every direction, seeking to evade the turning, twisting, returning biplane, with its spouting machine gun.

At last, save for huddled groups that were on their knees, beseeching mercy, there were no more targets for the machine gun. The biplane swooped down, came to a stop, and two men in flying togs alighted.

Wallie and his party joined them. Vern Bogart was a short, compactly built young man, with jet-black hair and quick, nervous gestures.

"Did you tell Rough to get out?" he asked.

"Sure," Wallie replied, "but he wouldn't. O' course, he's sorry now—"

Trembling, his fingers fumbling with the bandage he was trying to put on his wounded arm, the outlaw chief whimpered: "I thought, senor—"

"You thought you owned this section of Mexico, didn't you?" Vern Bogart nodded. "Well, you defied the government too long. That's why they encouraged me, when I suggested your gang be wiped out. It was Wallie's plan, to attack your hang-out in an airplane, if you didn't leave this section. I'll leave it to Wallie to decide what will be done with you." He dismissed the subject.

Wallie glanced at the huddled bandits. All the fight was taken out of them. The gang's power was broken. They'd give no more trouble. Then he looked at Rough. Leo offered a suggestion.

"Shoot him like a mad dog," the puncher suggested. "If you turn him loose, he'll start more trouble."

Wallie shook his head. He couldn't kill the bandit chief now, in cold blood.

Once more his eyes traveled to Rough. Doris Forrest was kneeling beside the bandit, helping him bandage his wounded arm. The girl looked up. There was something in Wallie's gaze that brought a faint flush to the girl's face.

A snarl shocked the cowboy into the immediate present. Wallie's eyes dilated. When the girl assisted in bandaging Rough's arm, she had placed her six-gun on the ground, out of his reach. The outlaw had snatched it up. Then, with a snarl, he swung around, aimed that gun at Wallie.

IT was kill or be killed, with the odds in Rough's favor. Quicker than lightning, Wallie's hand darted toward a holstered revolver. The bandit chief fired, seemingly as the cowboy's hand started. Even so, Rough was too slow. Wallie's gun thundered a tiny instant sooner.

Miraculously a round hole appeared in Rough's shirt, just above the heart. The gun fell from his fingers. One hand went toward his mustache, as if to stroke it. Then he plunged forward, quivered and lay still.

Wallie Bates, untouched by the bandit's bullet, thrust his revolver back into its holster. "Buzzard food—before sunset," he muttered.

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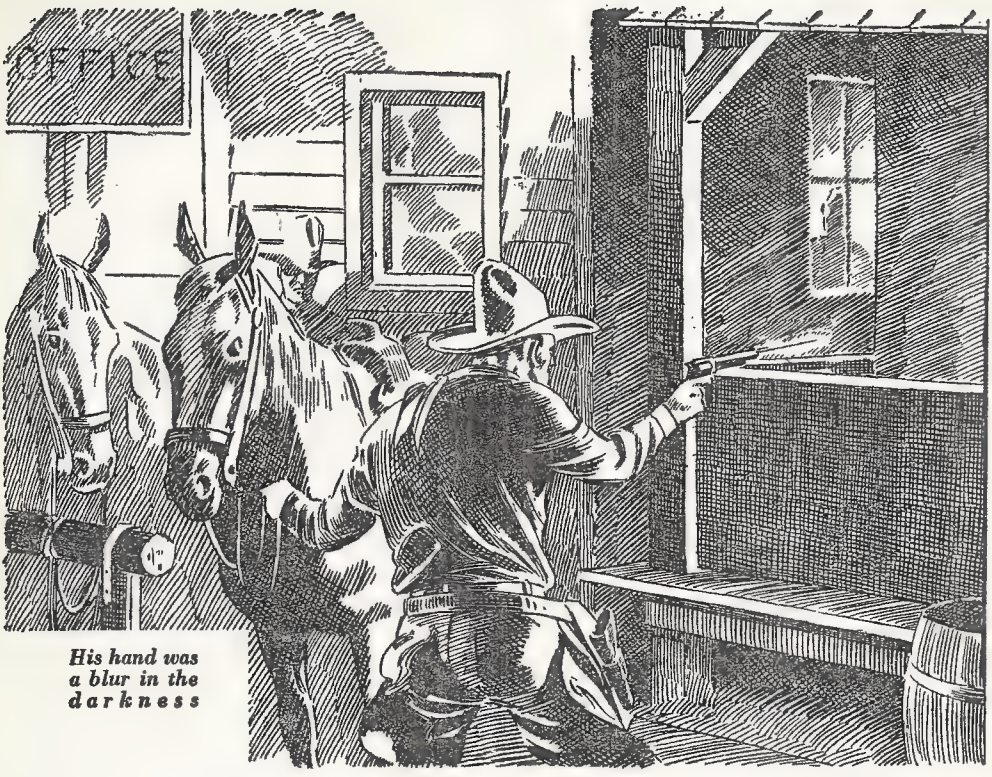
THEY NEVER COME BACK.....Baseball .....James Rourke
GRIDIRON BRUISER.....Football.....Duane A. Yarnell
CASTOR OIL OUTLAWS.....Auto Race.....Ross Russell

A FACT FEATURE

DOPE FROM THE DUGOUT.....Wilcey Earle



His hand was a blur in the darkness

LAWMAN'S HERITAGE

by BRUCE BRYAN

Not until the old-timer could face the man who had murdered his son would he ever again buckle a six-shooter about his waist—but when that time came would his trigger magic still be with him or would old age have slowed down his draw, sending the Old-Timer to join his son in an unavenged Boot-Hill Rest!

SHERIFF "OLE" QUIMBY'S nose was blue, but his language was even bluer.

He cursed the blustry weather and the necessity that had dragged him out into it. At fifty a man slows up a bit, his blood gets sluggish and the cold seeps into his marrow. But if a man has a job, especially a job enforcing the law, he can't let age stand in the way. Too many younger men looking for his job, anyhow! And Sheriff Quimby had long ago made up his mind who he wanted to be his successor.

A raw wind blew into his face, keening over the high malpais. For a moment his mind dwelt fondly on the stiff peg of whiskey with which he planned to insult his stomach as soon as he got back to town. But even by this short-cut across the rough face of the desert, it was still all of ten

miles back to Hades. Damn these rustlers —why couldn't they operate in respectable temperatures!

The sheriff cursed again, slapping his hands briskly against the pommel of his saddle. God, how he wished he was young again. As young, say, as that clean-cut son of his. The grizzled lawman's lips cracked in a smile of proud affection as he thought of the boy. Someday, he hoped, the button would step into his own shoes—someday after he had finished his education. He recalled the argument they'd had that very morning. Lon didn't want to go back to school. He wanted to stay in town and go to work as one of his father's deputies. But the sheriff was insistent. Learning came first.

So it had been decided. Lon was to go back to that college in the East, leaving on the one o'clock stage. Meanwhile, there'd been some trouble—rustlers harrying old man Cree's Circle C spread down in the valley. Sheriff Quimby found his last day with the youth cut short. He'd had to saddle up, despite the bitter weather, and ride out to look the situation over. He and his son had said goodbye that morning.

Now the sheriff was heading back to town, bending into the wind as his horse breasted the scraggy chaparral. On an impulse, he pulled out his watch. There was just a chance that he might intercept the stage on its way in to Dutch Crick. Perhaps the driver would stop long enough for him to have another word or two with Lon. Ole Quimby dug the spurs into his mount and headed down at right angles to the road.

Then it was that he spotted the roan, ground-hobbled in a clump of mesquite. Its color blended so naturally with its surroundings that, had he not almost ridden it down, the lawman never would have seen it. The roan stood tail to the wind, head drooping sadly. There was nothing else in sight. Ole Quimby pulled up short, a thin whistle of surprise pursing his lips. No rider in sight, yet from the way the horse shivered it must have been there for quite a spell. And it was saddled and bridled, ready to go!

SOMETHING, thought the sheriff, is in the wind beside frost. A man doesn't go off and just leave a horse in the desert. That cayuse looked like it had been staked out there for a definite purpose. But what purpose? A getaway? And if so, a getaway from what? Instinctively into the old lawman's alert mind came a significant remembrance. Carson, who rodded the Broken Jug mine up in the hills north of Hades, sometimes sent a shipment of dust down to the bank in Dutch Crick. He sent it at odd times in the stage, and he never hired a shotgun guard because that would only advertise the fact.

The road was less than fifty yards away. Dismounting stiffly, Ole Quimby drew his own mount back behind some cactus-strewn rocks. Then he hunkered down out of sight and drew his mackinaw more closely around him. He wasn't at all sure—perhaps the stage had already gone by. But just the same it smelled bad.

The minutes dragged slowly. The watching officer shivered from the biting cold. He looked disgustedly at his hands. They were numb and purple. A thin oath issued from his bloodless lips. How the hell could a man handle his irons with hands that had no feeling in them? Angrily, he began to slap them together in an effort to restore circulation.

Suddenly he stopped, senses tensed. Down the road came an unmistakable sound —the jingle of harness, the clop-clop of hooves on hard ground, the creaking of wheels. Ole Quimby's almost senseless hands dropped to the twin guns belted about his waist, fumbled for the curved butts. Around the bend rattled the stage, swaying dangerously to the side.

"Tex" Grinnell, the driver, was perched alone on the box. His eyes raked the brush at the side of the road. Without warning, he hauled back on the reins—the lumbering vehicle slowed up, came to a stop. Ole Quimby half rose from his concealment, then sank back again. Better see what it was all about, first.

Looping the reins over a stanchion, the stage-driver leapt to the ground.

"Somethin' draggin' the brake-shoe," the sheriff heard him rasp into the window of the coach. "Get out an' help me, will yuh?"

The door opened and the lone passenger climbed out. Ole Quimby stiffened as he recognized his son. But he continued to watch, biding his time. No sense in tipping his hand prematurely. Maybe the brake *was* dragging, after all.

He saw his son stride over to the rear wheel, bend down to examine the brake-shoe. Standing over him, as if to point out what was wrong, Grinnell suddenly swung a Colt up over his head. Sheriff Quimby swore savagely and went for his guns. But the deadly cold had gotten into his hands and he fumbled his draw. The stage-driver's clubbed weapon fell—on Lon Quimby's head. The youth dropped without a moan.

Without hesitating, Grinnell reached up under the box and drew forth a heavy bag. The mine's shipment of gold dust! Then he looked up, startled, as the raging sheriff plunged into the open. Caught with the sack in his right hand, Grinnell tried desperately to make a lefthanded draw. Ole Quimby fired first, but his hand was almost dead. The shot went wild. Slowly, painfully, he dragged back the hammer of the other gun, mouthing insane epithets.

The stage-driver's aim was better—his slug caught the lawman in the shoulder, knocked him sideways. Ole Quimby's frozen thumb slipped off the hammer, his gun kicked up with a dull roar. Looking up despite the searing pain of his wound, the sheriff's face twisted with horror. . . .

In the split seconds while he had been trying to pull back that hammer with a thumb that seemed made of wood, Grinnell had caught up the unconscious body of Lon Quimby, propped it up before him as a living shield. Sheriff Quimby's second shot had caught his own son squarely between the eyes.

Things went blank for the stricken lawofficer after that. He never remembered just what happened between that time and the time he arrived back in Hades with his son's lifeless body. Dimly, he knew that Grinnell, still clinging to his son's body and menacing him with a leveled Colt, had circled about him and worked his way to where the saddled roan stood waiting. It was as if Ole Quimby's stunned mind had concentrated on the gun in the stage-driver's hand because he was afraid to meet the sightless stare in Lon's unseeing eyes.

Back in Hades, Sheriff Quimby buried young Lon Quimby. Then he turned in his badge and hung up his guns. Never again could he bring himself to use the weapons that had dealt death to his own flesh and blood. Never again, unless . . . In his mind, as if etched in by fire, was that unforgettable picture of the gun in the stage-driver's hand—the gun and the way in which it was held!

IT was hot in Hades.

Men's thirsts were long and their tempers short. All they could think of was slaking the first and giving vent to the latter. And as the Poison Hole saloon provided a common meeting ground for both, it stood to reason that the rest of town was about as lively as a morgue. Which was as it should be. Shuddering in winter and sweltering in summer—Hades was any pessimist's perfect conception of hell.

Nobody noticed the alkali-covered figure that rode into the south end of town. Save for a number of wilted saddle-horses

standing dejectedly at the hitch-rack outside the bar, the dusty street was deserted. Farther along, the blacksmithy was silent; the feed-and-grain emporium was as empty as a bleached skull; and even the sheriff's office looked as if it might be for rent.

The rider grinned to himself, his bearded lips cracking wolfishly. This was what he had figured on. He swabbed a red neck with a redder bandanna and slowed his mount to a more cautious approach. Two unpainted frame buildings loomed before him, the livery stable on one hand and the single-story bank on the other. Inside the latter a man stood in the cashier's cage, engaged in counting a sheaf of crinkled green bills.

Hearing the soft clip-clop of hoofbeats muffled in 'dobe dust, the cashier looked up just as the newcomer turned toward the water trough in front of the livery stable. There was nothing about the man to attract especial attention, unless it was the fact that his roan cayuse was lame. But plenty of cayuses came out of that desert with a halting gait. Not wishing to lose count, the cashier returned his gaze to the money in his hand.

The stranger dismounted before the livery stable. Pausing only long enough to throw a quick glance up the empty street, he strode with clinking spurs into the building. There was no one there, but on a table in the office was a bag of oats. A thin smile twitched the man's lips as he reached out and appropriated the feed. The sack was nowhere near full, but he had an idea where he could get it filled—filled with something better than grain.

Outside again, he moved with an assured tread across the sun-baked street. This was going to be easy—almost too easy.

At the sound of his rowels on the step, the cashier looked up.

"Howdy, stranger . . ." he began with a smile of greeting, then froze as he found himself staring into the unwavering muzzle of a forty-five Colt.

"Howdy yoreself," returned the stranger, grinning bleakly through the black stubble of his beard. "See this here sack of oats?"

The man in the cage nodded, running his tongue over suddenly dry lips.

"It's almost empty. Needs fillin'. Fill 'er up, Mister!"

The cashier looked nervously out the open door. There was no one in sight. Too well he knew the bulk of Hades' population could be found at that time of day only in the Poison Hole. Even Cal Mantz, the livery man, knocked off as regular as clockwork at this hour for his daily bracer. The cashier looked longingly at the gun resting in the open drawer before him.

"Better let it lay," advised the gunman drily. "Here!" He thumped the oat bag on the counter before the wire cage. "Fill it up, pronto. I want the long green stuff. It's lighter, an' it goes farther."

The cashier shrugged helplessly. Taking care to keep his hands in plain sight, he stuffed the sack with greenbacks. Then, with a sigh, he pushed it out of the cage.

"That's all there is," he said, exhaling slowly. "Twenty-two hundred, and earned a damn sight harder than you earn money, I reckon."

"I reckon," returned the gunman laconically. "Twenty-two hundred! Hardly worth stoppin' for. Not much like the old days, is it?"

The bank clerk's eyes widened a little and studied the bandit's bearded features more closely.

"The old days? What old days?"

A dull flush tinged the hold-up man's neck.

"Never yuh mind," he retorted. "Come outta that monkey's cage of yores. I'm goin' to tie yuh up so's yuh won't be settin' the bloodhoun's on me soon's my back's turned. Come on, poco tiempo!"

The cashier walked slowly out of his cell-like compartment, came around to the front and faced the stranger. The latter drew a latigo from his pocket, but he didn't shift the gun from his right hand to his left.

"Turn aroun'," he ordered, "an' hold yore hands out behind yuh."

The cashier obeyed. The gunman's arm swung up in a short arc. It came down heavily. The cashier's mouth opened, but no sound issued from between his lips. The only sound audible was the soggy crunch of his skull caving in.

"Sorry, pardner," grunted the killer. "But yuh know how it is—I can't take a chance on anybody's identifyin' me."

Catching up the money-stuffed oat bag, he stepped warily out the door. Still no one in sight on the rutted trail that was Hades' main street. But a sustained rumble of heavy masculine voices, laughing, cursing and sobbing maudlinly emanated from the batwing doors and open windows of the Poison Hole. Retracing his steps to where his fagged horse waited with drooping head, the gunman stabbed appraising eyes at the water trough in front of the livery stable.

His glance traveled on to the exhausted roan. He shrugged. The animal was getting old, and anyhow it was lame. Drawing his gun, the bandit took quick aim and pulled the trigger. The single shot barked out, biting at the heat waves with a sullen whine. The horse reared half in the air, came down on its knees. It pawed futilely at the ground, then rolled over on its side.

After that the bearded gunman worked fast. Thrusting the muzzle of the Colt down inside his right boot, he ripped powerfully, tearing a jagged rent in the leather. He slapped dust heavily on his leg from hip to instep. Then he fired two more shots, into the air, and began to bellow at the top of his voice.

"Come back hyar, yuh damned . . . Help! Help, somebody. Bank robbers!"

The empty street in front of the Poison Hole came alive like a disturbed nest of hornets. Men swarmed forth with drawn guns, astonished by the sight of a wild man standing cursing beside a dead horse. No one paid any attention to the seedy looking old man who stood on the outside of the crowd and stared with an odd look at the dead roan. . . .

HALF an hour later, surrounded by an excited group in the Poison Hole, the stranger was giving his version of the hold-up for the fifth or sixth time.

"It's jest as I was sayin', boys. I come ridin' into town when I sees this hombre backin' outta the bank. Not knowin' it was a bank, at first I didn't suspicion nothin'. Then he turns round an' I sees he's got a red bandanna tied over his face. I don't have to be knocked on the head to know he wasn't headed for no masquerade party. Besides, he's got a gun in one hand an' a flour sack in the other—a flour sack that looks to be bulgin' some.

"So I yells at him an' drags for my hawglaig. But that iron in his fist spits out at me an' takes my cayuse in the head. While I'm tryin' to get loose from a dead bronc he's crawlin' aboard a black stallion an' burnin' air outta town. Yuh can see where my boot's tore."

The batwing doors of the saloon swung inward and a florid-faced man wearing a sheriff's star came in. His lips ruled a straight line between his beaked nose and jutting chin.

"Jed's done for, all right," he announced grimly to the men lined up before the bar. "Head's busted like a ripe tomato. An' the money drawer looks like it's had a dry cleanin'." He turned level eyes on the stranger. "Which way did yuh say the bandit lit out, Mister?"

"Gammel's the name, sheriff. 'Gusty' Gammel," drawled the stranger. "I already

told yuh, he was foggin' for them mountains north of here when I plugged a couple shots after him. If they'd been anybody on the street we mighta nailed him."

"Funny you didn't nail him," retorted the lawman, eyeing the low-slung scabbard lashed to the stranger's thigh. "I don't reckon yuh carry yore hardware that low just for ornament."

"Yuh forget I was tryin' to get my leg out from under a dead cayuse," reminded Gammel, his bull neck flushing red.

"I don't forget nothin'," observed the sheriff thoughtfully. "We heard three shots. That's what brought us all pilin' outta the Poison Hole. Yuh say the thief plugged one at you, which killed yore bronc. The other two was what yuh sent after him. I'd like to take a look at yore iron, Mister."

"Shore! shore!" agreed Gammel readily, handing it over.

As he held it out, a white-haired man in tattered levis crowded closer and stared with rheumy eyes at his hand.

Sheriff Gleason broke the gun and looked at the cylinder. There were three unfired cartridges in it, and three which bore the pointed imprint of a fallen hammer. His eyes hard, he looked up at the stranger. An oath formed on his lips, but remained unspoken. Instead,

"Looks to me like yuh fired three shots, Mister," he drawled significantly. "An' three was what we heard."

Gammel's bearded lips parted in an assured smile.

"Wal, now, sheriff," he drawled easily. "Yuh know as well as I do that most hombres carry only five loaded shells in their hawglaigs. I allus let the hammer rest on a fired ca'tridge."

"That's right, Gleason!" exclaimed one of the men, and others nodded their concurrence. With the firing-pin resting on an empty shell there's no danger of a single-action gun going off accidentally. The hammer has to be thumbed back.

The sheriff said nothing. He jacked the empty cartridges out of the cylinder and pressed them against his lips, but in the time that had passed since the gun was fired they had all cooled.

"I ain't sayin' I doubt yore word, stranger," he remarked significantly, returning the Colt. "But yo're a newcomer in Hades an' it's just possible yuh could have done this killin' yoreself. We didn't find no tracks leadin' outta town toward them hills."

Gammel laughed disdainfully.

"I reckon not," he agreed. "That street's fetlock deep in dust, an' there's half a dozen caballos tied up to the rack outside. Be a right pert tracker could pick up the trail of one horse in all that mess."

"Yuh didn't say what yore business was here in Hades," stated the lawman pointedly. "Nor do I recollec' hearin' yuh say where yuh came from."

"That's right, sheriff. I didn't, now, did I?" eclaimed Gammel in mock surprise. "I'm plumb forgetful that way!"

"Uh-huh! Some folks are," returned the officer meaningly.

"Yuh looked through my saddlebags, an' I let yuh frisk me," reminded the gunman. "Yuh didn't find nothin', an' I shore didn't have no time to hide anythin' as prominent-lookin' as a bag of dinero."

"He's right," chimed in a man at the sheriff's elbow. "We didn't find the money on him, an' they ain't no place he could've hid it in so short a time."

This made logic to the men grouped about the pair—all except the seedy looking old fellow, who kept staring at Gammel's sleeve in an intense sort of fashion. But the old-timer said nothing. No one paid any attention to what he said, anyhow. The sheriff hesitated, as if he would have liked to ask more questions. His lips were a tight line and his eyes betrayed unsatisfied suspicion, but the stranger's answers had been outspoken enough.

"I reckon that's all, Mister," he said at length. "Just stick around town for a few days, case I need to question yuh some more."

He turned on his heel and went out.

"Hell!" snorted Gammel, swinging back to the bar. "Don't see why the star-toter don't pinch me if he thinks I did it!" He made a wide-handed gesture. "Step up an' name it, boys. I'm buyin'!"

The invitation was accepted with alacrity by all but one person. The white-haired old-timer in the tattered levis started for the swinging doors. In his ragged clothes and scuffed-out boots, he was an inconspicuous figure and no one paid him any heed. Steve, the bartender, paid him a few dollars now and then for swamping out the Poison Hole. Aside from that, the old man kept pretty much to himself. Nobody has any use for a has-been.

BUT Gusty Gammel, turning to see that everybody had heard him, spotted the old-timer as he reached out a gnarled hand to push open the doors.

"Hey, you!" he barked. "I said *everybody* drinks!"

The old-timer paused, looking back over his shoulder. His loose jowls, covered with a white stubble of several days' growth, twitched with a contemptuous expression.

"I—I was a friend of Jed, the cashier at the bank," he stated slowly. "An' I don't know you, Mister."

Gammel emitted a roar of rage at the pointed inference.

"Why, yuh danged ol' . . ." In three long strides he reached the older man, caught his bony shoulder in a crushing grip and swung him around. "Ain't no two-legged critter refusin' to drink when Gusty Gammel buys. Up to the bar, yuh coyote!"

A queer look came into the old-timer's colorless eyes. He jerked away. His hands fell almost instinctively to his hips—but there were no guns belted about those lean flanks. The hands dropped futilely at his sides.

"Take yore dirty paw off me, Mister!" he said quietly.

Gammel's bearded lips writhed back like a mad lobo baring yellow fangs. He cuffed the smaller man sharply across the head.

"I said up to the bar, hombre!"

The old-timer suddenly seemed to unwind. A bony fist landed with a solid smack against the gunman's jaw. Surprised by the unexpected attack, Gammel gave back a pace. His eyes went murderous. He made an eye-baffling movement and his gun seemed to leap into his fist.

Men surged forward, yelling. Steve, the barkeeper, leapt over his counter.

"Wait, Gammel! He's unarmed!" he cried warningly.

Half a dozen men threw themselves on Gammel's gun-arm, just as the Colt went off with a dull thunder. The bullet ploughed into the floor, lifting a jagged splinter at the old man's feet.

"The—!" snarled Gammel angrily. "No man can swing at me an' get away with it!"

"Take it easy, stranger," advised one of the men clinging to his gun-wrist. "Old Quimby didn't mean no harm. He never drinks with the boys. He—he's just . . . Old Quimby."

Now that the danger was over, men were more concerned with sizing up this bearded newcomer with the lightning draw than they were about the man who had barely escaped death. No one noticed how Old Quimby's faded eyes were riveted on the still-smoking gun and the hand that held it. Then, without a word, the old-timer turned and slipped outside into the sweltering street.

The barkeeper breathed a sigh of relief as the tension eased and the men trooped back to their drinks. As fast as each man called his choice, Steve slid bottle and glass in front of him. Then he leaned on his elbow and addressed Gammel in a confidential tone.

"Yuh shouldn't get het up about Old Quimby, pardner. He's no-'count. Just a hanger-on, harmless as a horn toad. I give him a little piece of change now an' then for swampin' out the place, because I feel sorry for him. Folks aroun' here think the old coot's a little loco, but they go easy on him 'count of what he used to be."

The gunman lifted his shaggy brows in pretended curiosity as he polished off a straight rye.

"Yeah?" he asked. "What'd he use to be?"

"Hell on wheels!" There was a light of reminiscence in the barkeep's eyes. "Old Quimby was sheriff here in Hades about fifteen years back. A devil-baitin', lead-swappin' gunfighter! He was old even then, an' it looked like he was goin' to keep his job for life. But there was a stagecoach robbery in which he accidentally killed his own son. He's never been any good since."

Gammel seemed unusually preoccupied with his empty glass as he listened to Steve. So that tottering old relic was Old Quimby —the Ole Quimby he had long thought dead and then casually forgotten! He rubbed a rough hand over his bristly chin. Time sure changes a man—but it works both ways. Himself, he was maybe fifty pounds heavier, now, besides having that beard. He poured himself another drink, keeping his eyes on what he was doing.

"Tell me about it," he urged.

"Ain't much to tell," continued the barman, industriously wiping a glass. "Nobody actually seen it happen, an' the old man's always been kinda queer since then. Yuh see, there was a mine up in them hills at the time, an' it shipped dust down to the bank in Dutch Crick. Wasn't any bank in Hades in those days. No one knows just how it happened, but somehow Old Quimby trapped the stage-driver tryin' to get away with the gold. In the gun-fight that followed, the stage-driver got between the old man an' his son, usin' the button as a shield. The boy happened to be ridin' the stage on the way back to school."

Gammel cast a furtive glance to each side. No one was paying any attention to his conversation with the barman.

"This stage-driver," he asked, "did he get away?"

Steve nodded shortly.

"Yeah. Seems he had a horse tethered in the mesquite, 'side the road. I forget his name, but nobody's ever seen him since."

Gammel finished his whiskey with elaborate carelessness, feigning only a casual interest in the barkeeper's story.

"Then what happened?" he asked, making a show of stifling a yawn.

Steve shrugged.

"Old Quimby turned in his star an' hung up his guns for keeps. Swore he could never drop a hammer again with the thumb that killed his own son. An' so far's anybody knows, he never has. Reason he feels so bad about Jed, the bank cashier, is because Jed's his son-in-law. Old Quimby lived with them. 'Pears like his daughter'll have a pretty hard time of it now."

THE bartender turned away to serve a new customer who considered he had arrived in time to share in the general set-up. Gammel's eyes were slitted as he wiped his thick lips, but no one was paying him more than idle attention. He waited till Steve turned his way again.

"I didn't mean the old codger no harm," he drawled ingratiatingly. "But he sorta riled me with his insinuations. How come he never set out to trail that stage-driver down?"

Steve touched his forehead expressively.

"Most folks think the shock of his son's death kinda short-circuited his think-tank. He never did much talkin' about it, but he's got some crazy notion about a criminal always comin' back to the scene of the crime. Most lawmen have that idea."

"He might not know him, this long after," suggested Gammel.

The barkeeper laughed.

"Probably not, pardner. Fifteen years makes a lot of difference in most hombres. But Old Quimby claims he'll know if he ever runs into the man again. Seems the stage-driver had some funny habit—you know, like a man sometimes has a way of twitchin' his nose, or pullin' at his ear unconsciously?"

Gammel declined a drink on the house.

"Tell that star-toter I'll be around town if he hones to see me again," he said, turning away. "I've got to strip my rig off'n that dead cayuse an' see about buyin' another."

He swaggered out, a thoughtful scowl on his coarse features. His hand swung in easy reach of his low-holstered gun.

The sheriff's office still had a vacant look to it, but the inside belied its outward appearance. Sheriff Gleason sat with his chair tilted back, spurs hooked on the edge of a battered desk. His thumbs were hooked in the armholes of a cowhide vest and his florid face was set in a pondering mask. Old Quimby bent over the opposite side of the desk, his watery eyes probing into the officer's.

"I'm tellin' yuh, sheriff," he insisted, "them three empty ca'tridges in that hombre's gun don't mean nothin'. He could've done it, all right. He admits comin' in from that end of town, don't he?"

"Shore," grunted the lawman irritably. "But if he did it, where'd he hide the money? I can't arrest a man unless I've got proof. Say," he added, looking up suspiciously, "yo're not holdin' somethin' back from me, are yuh? If yuh've got some evidence that—"

Old Quimby started to blurt out what he knew, then changed his mind. If he told Gleason, the latter would go out and arrest the man. And this was something the old-timer did not want to happen. He didn't want Gammel taken into custody—he wanted to handle Gammel's case himself. After all, who had a better right? But he wanted to do it in the proper fashion—do it as he might have done it back in . . .

"No," he denied cannily, "I haven't no proof, but I've got a hunch an' I want to play it. Gleason, I want yuh to swear me in as a deputy until Jed's murderer is brought to—justice!"

Sheriff Gleason stared up at Old Quimby with calculating interest.

"Thought yuh'd hung up yore guns long ago, old-timer," he drawled softly.

"I reckon they'll still shoot the buttons off a killer," retorted the old man, his watery eyes hardening. "Do I get deputized?"

The sheriff stood up and raised his right hand.

"I don't know what yo're up to, but I don't see why not. Hold up yore hand!"

Old Quimby pinned the deputy's badge inside his ragged shirt and turned his shuffling steps toward the outskirts of town. In a grove of nodding cottonwoods was the small house in which he had lived with his daughter and her husband for the past fifteen years. He slipped in quietly, avoiding a meeting with the woman. Time enough to break the tragic news to her later. It was a bad business, and he needed all the nerve he had for the next few hours.

He heard her puttering about in the kitchen, and gathered that as yet no one had told her of her husband's murder. Old Quimby was glad of that. He preferred that when the news was broken it be accompanied by an announcement that the killing had been avenged. On creaking boots, he tiptoed to his own room and locked himself in. Then he stood for a moment, gazing at the wall. Over the bed hung a pair of bright-nickeled Colts, their horn handles worn and yellowed.

Old Quimby reached up quivering hands and took them down. His gnarled fingers stroked them almost caressingly. "Fifteen years!" he muttered to himself. "F-fifteen

(Continued on page 116)

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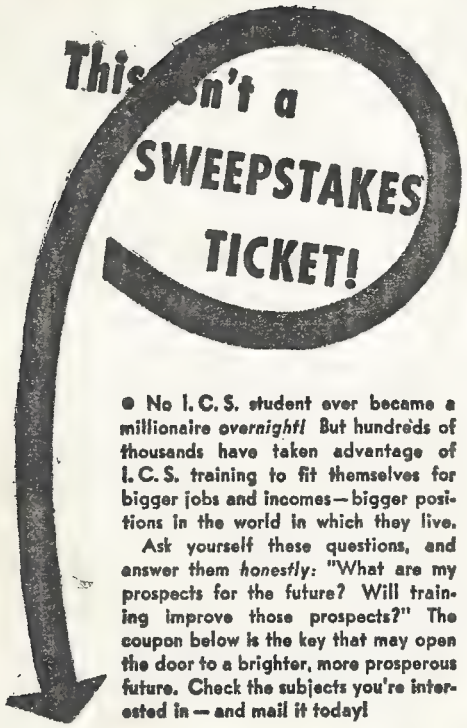

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years, an' he came back. I always knew he would. . . ."

Tremblingly, he buckled the twin scabbards about his lean waist, lashed them down to his thighs. A subtle change seemed to come over the old-timer as his withered frame felt the sagging weight of those heavy forty-fives. His body bent in an instinctive crouch, elbows bowed slightly out, hands clawed talonlike above the curved butts. This was no play-acting carried on before a mirror; it was the drama of a man trying to recall his heritage.

"I—I'll count three," whispered Old Quimby to himself. "One—two—*three!*"

His fingers leapt for the holstered guns. But they were old fingers, stiff and roughened by time and rheumatic from sweeping out damp saloon floors. One Colt caught by its front sight, fell to the floor with a loud thump. The other came up unsteadily, as if it were too heavy for such a frail hand, while a crooked thumb tried unsuccessfully to flip back the hammer.

"Damn!" muttered Old Quimby to himself. It seemed like all his fingers were thumbs.

A FLUSH of self-shame spread over his sallow features as he stood there uncertainly in the center of the floor. His narrow shoulders drooped as if with the weight of years.

"Damn!" he said again. "Once it was the cold—now it's old age. I'm not a gunfighter. I couldn't beat a two-year-old to the draw!"

Bending over stiffly, he picked up the fallen gun. Absently, he shoved both irons back into their holsters. With a sigh of resignation he started out. Ability or no ability, he had a job of work to do. He laughed grimly to himself. All he had to do was tell the sheriff what he knew, and the man who called himself Gammel would swing from a gallows rope. But what would Lon say to that—Lon, who might himself

have been sheriff today? No, there was a score to be paid, a long overdue one. Very likely it would be his last, but—it had to be paid off!

As Old Quimby reached the front door he ran right into his daughter. The woman's smile of affection changed into an expression of apprehension as her eyes fell on the double cartridge belts looped across his waist.

"Dad!" she choked, with swift, half-recognized fear. "Those guns! Wh-where are you going?"

Old Quimby was unable to meet her gaze.

"I—I'm sorry, Peg," he mumbled. "I can't tell yuh just now. There's somethin' I've got to—take care of. Yes, take care of!"

He shouldered past her, into the street. She stared after him, unshed tears smarting her eyes, her jaw lax with unnamed fear. He was so—*different.*

Old Quimby made his way toward the livery stable. Cal Mantz, the hostler, looked up with a hostile glare. But he grinned as he saw who it was.

"You painted for war, old-timer?" he asked wonderingly.

"That stranger leave his saddle here?" demanded Old Quimby abruptly.

Mantz waved an arm toward a rack. The old man moved closer and looked the rig over. Idly, he picked up the right stirrup, covered by a leather tap.

"Gammel took the trouble to show where his boot was ripped," he mused aloud, "but there ain't no scratches on this tap."

"Say, that's right," remarked Mantz, coming over to look. "Claimed the bronc fell on his leg, didn't he?"

"That's what he claimed. Did Gammel buy another cayusé from yuh?"

Mantz nodded. "Yeah. Unloaded that wild-eyed pinto on him for a hundred bucks."

Old Quimby grunted. "Yuh hooked him, all right. Sometimes I wish I didn't have

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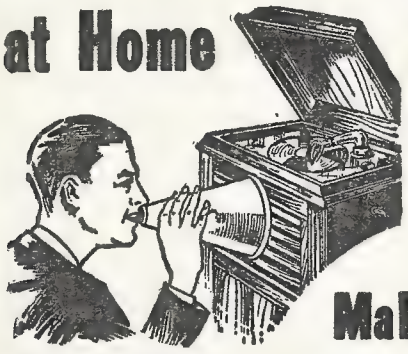

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no conscience, so I could go in the livery business."

The hostler grinned.

" 'Tain't all profit, old-timer. Somebody came in here today an' walked off with a sack of oats. Oh, well! It's what I get for leavin' it lyin' here in plain sight while I was over at the Poison Hole coolin' my tonsils."

Old Quimby made no comment. He'd hobbled over to cast a curious glance at the water trough.

"Ever clean this thing out?" he called back over his shoulder.

Mantz shrugged lazily.

"Sometimes," he drawled. "But what the hell! It's water, ain't it? Cayuses don't want pink tea. By gawd, Quimby, I've seen the day yuh drank dirtier stuff than that an' was danged glad to get it!"

The old man shuffled back.

"Mantz," he said abruptly, "I been thinkin' about what yuh just told me—about missin' things now an' then, like that sack of grain. Maybe yuh oughtta have somebody around here nights to sorta watch the place. Now, I could—"

The livery man stared at him. He thought he understood. Now that Jed, the cashier, was gone the old man and his daughter stood to have a tough time of it. Old Quimby was too old to do much at earning a living. Again Mantz' eyes fell on the sixguns sagging from the old-timer's hips.

"That's a swell idea, amigo!" he exclaimed. "I reckon I can pay yuh a dollar a night an' dinner to boot. It'd shore be worth it to me."

IT WAS past midnight. Old Quimby crouched awkwardly in the shadows of the corral beside the livery stable. From where he squatted he could watch both the water trough and the street without being seen. An hour dragged slowly by. The old-timer stiffly changed his cramped posi-

tion and yawned. At his age it was difficult to keep awake.

Suddenly he heard something that sounded like muffled footsteps. He shrank farther back in the concealing gloom, peering about with hazy eyes. The noise had seemed to come from his right, over there behind the corral. But there was no further sound and no sign of any movement. For a moment he pondered sneaking around in back of the livery stable to come up on the other side of the corral.

The faint creak of leather came to his ears, this time from the street. A man strode softly through the ankle-deep dust, leading a pinto horse behind him. Casting a furtive glance about the apparently deserted stable, the man headed over toward the water trough. Old Quimby drew his breath in sibilantly, thin lips writhing back in a grin of stark hatred. But he made no move as the man known as Gammel bent over the murky trough, dipped a hand into its depths and fumbled about. A grunt of satisfaction issued from the gunman as his hand came up, clutching a soggy bag.

"Drop that sack, Grinnell, an' keep yore hands wide!" Old Quimby scarcely recognized the voice as his own.

A muttered curse escaped the gunman as his eyes stabbed into the shadows. That name reached out to him like a clammy phantom from the past. Slowly, he opened his fingers, let the bag fall to the ground.

"Where do yuh get that Grinnell stuff?" he asked, stalling. "Reckon it's no use tryin' to hide the fact I'm Gusty Gammel. But I never heard no name like Grinnell."

Old Quimby spat disgustedly.

"I knew yuh the minute yuh pulled yore gun on me in the Poison Hole today," he retorted. "Yuh got a funny habit of wrappin' yore fingers around the outside of a trigger-guard. I once knew a stage-driver named Grinnell who had the same habit. He had another bad habit, too, Mister!" The old-timer literally hissed the words at the killer. "A habit of hidin' his mangy

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28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
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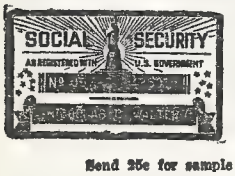

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carcass behind an unconscious kid, an' so help me—"

Grinnell decided to take a chance. His hand was a blur in the darkness, barely preceding a spouting gash of flame that leapt out from his hip. Old Quimby felt a terrific shock, as if somebody had dropped a sledge-hammer on his head. As he staggered back, senses reeling, he felt his own guns buck in his hands. But his head was whirling so dizzily he was unable to distinguish one shot from another. Tired old hands struggled to lift the weight of those guns again, but as they came up uncertainly he saw the dimly outlined form of the gunman relax and pitch forward on its face.

Another form seemed to materialize out of the gloom near at hand. Old Quimby recognized Sheriff Gleason.

"Yuh all right, old-timer?" demanded the lawman anxiously.

Old Quimby leaned back weakly against a corral post.

"Hell, yes!" he grunted. "Just creased." He gestured feebly toward the prone body of the gunman. "There's yore bank robber an' murderer!"

Before an excited knot of men who came running to the scene, the sheriff rolled the body over. There was one wound, a bullet hole punched neatly between the shaggy eyebrows.

Old Quimby snorted apologetically.

"Reckon I ain't as good as I use to be. Musta missed him with one gun."

The sheriff grinned to himself. "Tough old rooster!" he grunted under his breath. Then he picked up the wet oak sack, looked inside.

"It's all here," he announced, "an' it'll just about cover the reward the bank offers for holdup gents. But how'n hell did yuh know this hombre was the one who did it?"

Old Quimby looked even more apologetic.

"I'm—I'm sorry, sheriff," he said. "I lied to yuh about not havin' any evidence. But I first met up with this Grinnell skunk when I was an officer of the law, an' I sorta

hankered to finish the job as such—alone. I suspicioned who he was when I saw that dead horse he rode into town. I recognized that roan from a long time back. Then when he handed his gun over to yuh in the saloon, I noticed first off that his sleeve was wet. A man don't sweat from cuff to elbow, 'specially not just in one arm. That struck me as funny, an' when I seen a couple oat grains stickin' to his sleeve it looked even funnier. . . ."

Old Quimby's voice trailed off. That furrow in his scalp made him feel a little sick. Old Quimby was not a young man. He fainted, and the sheriff had him carried off to his home. The rest of the men crowded closer to stare at the body of the slain bandit.

"Who in hell would ever've expected Old Quimby to beat a gunman at his own game!" exclaimed one hombre wonderingly.

Steve, the bartender, pushed his way to the front.

"Yuh forget the old-timer used to be quite a hand at gunslingin' himself, once upon a time," he reminded. "Ain't that right, sheriff?"

Sheriff Gleason nodded shortly. His voice was suspiciously gruff.

"Yo're right, Steve. Old Quimby knew how to make his forty-fives sit up and talk turkey."

TO himself he decided that Grinnell's body would be consigned to Boot Hill without delay. For in his own mind was the unspoken knowledge that the slug in the dead gunman's skull was of *forty-four* caliber, and he didn't want anybody digging it out for a souvenir. Nor did the sheriff say anything about how he had hidden over on the other side of the corral to see what Old Quimby was up to and to keep him out of trouble.

But the Smith and Wesson forty-four that hung at his side was still warm from something more than mere body temperature!

Sells 19 Features In Six Months

"I have sold, up to date, nineteen features to the Detroit Free Press and have been made their correspondent here," writes Mrs. Leonard Sanders of 218 Union St., Milford, Mich., on completing the N. I. A. course. Her skilful handling of feature stories was the reason given by the editor for her appointment. Mrs. Sanders' first feature was sold less than four months after she enrolled with N. I. A.

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Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I *am* a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably *never will write.* Lawyers must be law clerks. Doctors must be internes. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

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NEWSPAPER Institute training is based on the New York Copy-Desk Method. It starts and keeps you writing in your own home, on your own time. Week by week you receive actual assignments, just as if you were right at work on a great metropolitan daily. Your writing is *individually* corrected and constructively criticized. A group of men, whose combined newspaper experience totals more than 200 years, are responsible for this instruction. Under such sympathetic guidance, you will find that (instead of vainly trying to copy some one else's writing tricks) you are rapidly developing your own distinctive, self-flavored style—undergoing an experience that has a thrill to it and which at the same time develops in you the power to make your feelings articulate.

Many people who *should* be writing become awe-struck by fabulous stories about millionaire authors and, therefore, give little thought to the $25, $50 and $100 or more that can often be earned for material that takes little time to write—stories, articles on business, fads, travels, sports, recipes, etc.—things that can easily be turned out in leisure hours, and often on the impulse of the moment.

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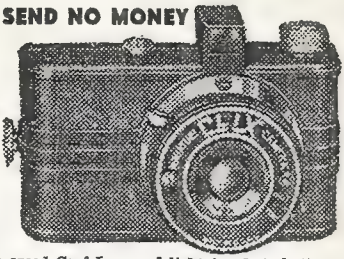

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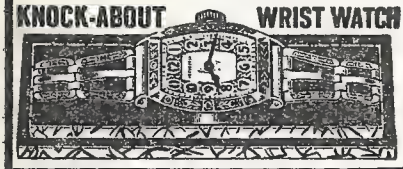

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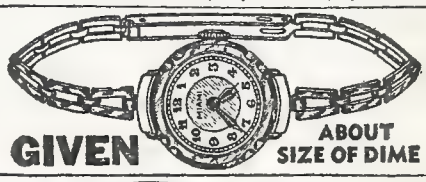

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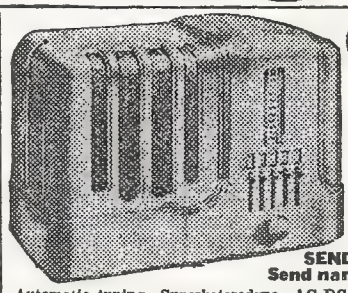

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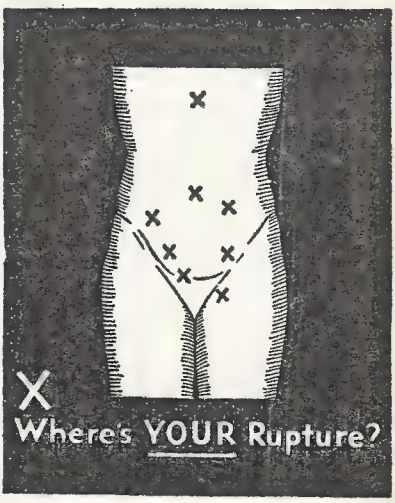

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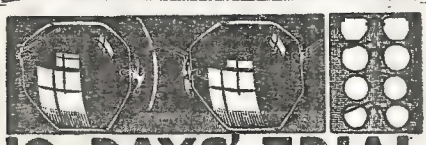

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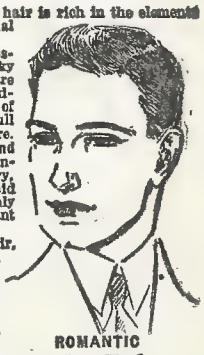

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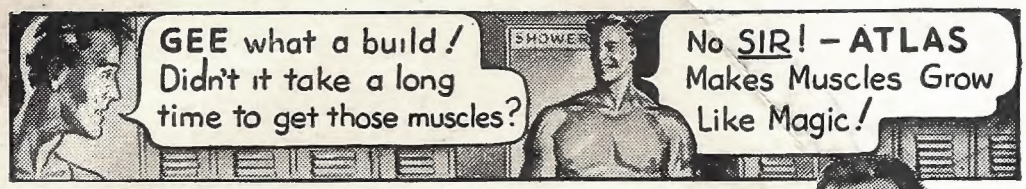

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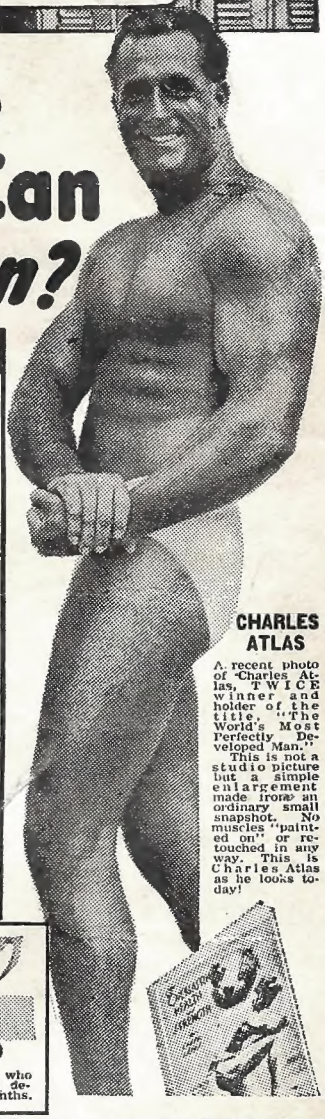

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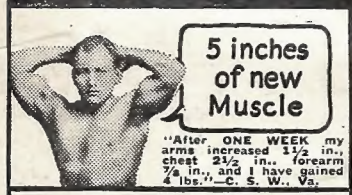

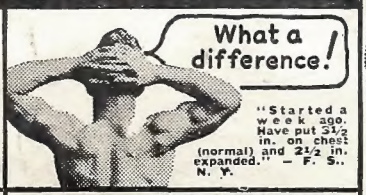

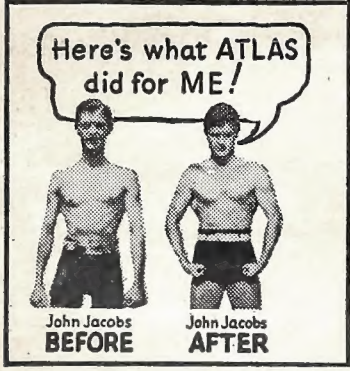

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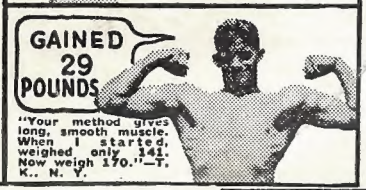

CHARLES ATLAS

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	7	
1		9
	3	

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